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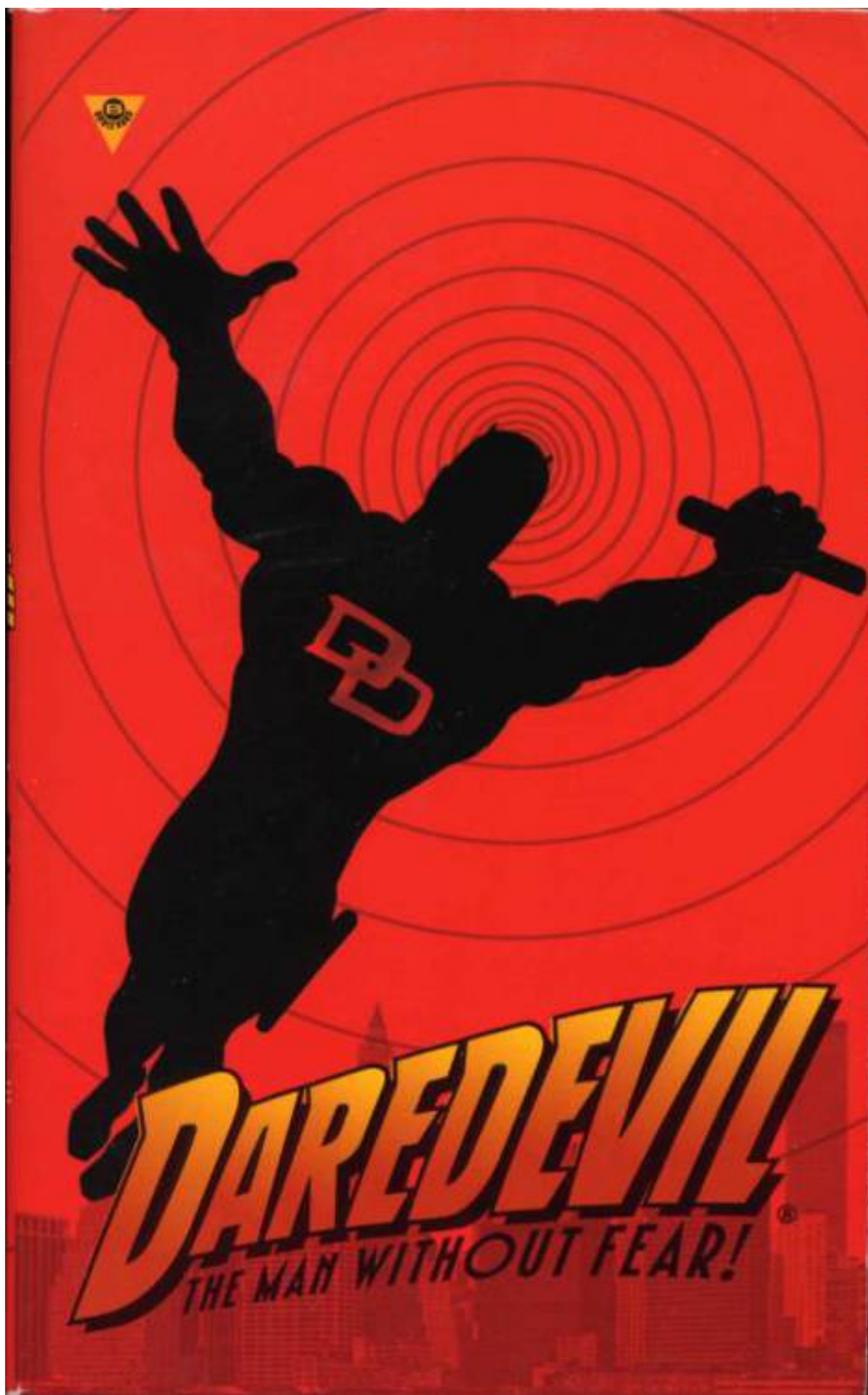
DAREDEVIL
THE MAN WITHOUT FEAR!

**THE
CUTTING
EDGE**

MADELEINE
E. ROBINS



650 U.S.
(899 CAN)



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THE CUTTING EDGE

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**For my brother,
Clem Robins,
fine hand letterer and brilliant
portraitist,**

With whom I spent many hours discussing the finer
points of
comic book plot and art, and who, when I got into the
comics
industry, introduced me around, told me the good gossip,
and
treated me more like a colleague than a big sister.

Thanks, kid!

No One Does This Alone Dept.

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The many writers and artists who have, over the decades, made Marvel's New York a cool backyard to play in, and Daredevil a fascinating character to play with—particularly Joe Kelly, within whose run of issues this book is set.

Finally, thanks to Michael Marks, wherever he is, who gave his comic book collection to my brother and me, and can therefore be considered liable for the crimes that have sprung therefrom....



January, Three Years Ago

The offices of Quayle-Partido Financial, Inc., were spread over two floors of very expensive Wall Street real estate, a twenty-two-story glass tower that overlooked the southernmost tip of Manhattan. Q-P's back office functions—fulfillment, accounting, research and the like—quietly occupied the 17th floor; the 18th floor housed the “power” areas—trading, mortgage paper, new issues, and the partners' offices. Both floors were richly neutral in their decor: beige linen walls, handsomely unchallenging modern art, thick chocolate carpets, brass fittings. The look implied success, stability, unobtrusive wealth. New clients visiting Quayle-Partido left the building with confidence that their financial business was in the hands of seasoned, conservative professionals.

Of course, new clients were rarely in the offices of Quayle-Partido long enough to detect the suppressed rush, the smell of adrenaline coursing through the veins of people who routinely juggled millions of dollars every day. And only the most astute of visitors caught a whiff of something else: the subtle stink of institutionalized fear that mingled with that adrenaline rush.

There was no such thing as a mistake at Quayle-Partido. Everyone—traders, secretaries, researchers, software specialists, securities managers—had seen what happened when something went wrong and the responsible party was called to a partner's office. A trader whose split-second decisions could make or lose ten million dollars in two minutes' time emerged from the office white-faced and shaking to clear out his desk and go home; a secretary reduced to hysterics after a five-minute meeting; the head of research, who had been with the firm for twenty years, gone without time to say good-bye to her co-workers. Anyone who made a mistake, regardless of who they were or how long they'd been there, did not stay long enough to

make another, their ego shredded on their way out the door.

But until that happened, the money was very good, and the high was even better. For some people, that was all that mattered.

The tall, slender blonde in the power suit walked past the secretary's station as if she did not expect to be stopped.

"Don't bother to buzz him, Mrs. Hampshire. I've been *summoned*," the blonde said without breaking her stride. She was smiling slightly.

Perdita Hampshire, short, graying, and forty pounds away from slender on a good day, looked at the blonde's retreating back with dislike and a moment of dawning hope. Perhaps Miss Belinda was going to get what Mrs. Hampshire privately called "the treatment." Perhaps Miss Belinda, despite her looks and her money and her lineage, was going to be raked over the coals, chewed up by the monsters and spat out reeling. It couldn't, Mrs. Hampshire thought, happen to a more deserving victim.

None of the rank-and-file at Quayle-Partido really liked Belinda Quayle. Certainly not Perdita Hampshire, Arthur Partido's secretary—Quayle-Partido did not indulge in ego-building titles like "executive assistant"—who had seen more than she wanted of Miss Belinda since she joined the firm. Belinda Quayle was beautiful and expensively groomed; she was the senior partner's granddaughter; and she was in line for a partnership someday. But these natural obstacles to popularity could have been forgiven ... if Belinda Quayle had been able to forget them herself. Instead, from the first moment that she joined the firm almost a year before, she had delighted in playing the part of Boss's Granddaughter to the hilt. She was routinely arrogant, manipulative, and casually cruel to the people who worked for her grandfather. She made it clear that she

had no interest in being liked by her co-workers, and didn't seem to see any advantage to it. She was the Heir Apparent, the Princess Royale. Someday all of this would be hers.

As Belinda vanished into Arthur Partido's office, Mrs. Hampshire crossed her fingers, hoping that the Princess had finally done something wrong and was about to pay for it. She smiled in anticipation and returned to the deal memo she was typing.

"Arthur?" Belinda closed the door behind her, and smiled. "You wanted to see me?"

Arthur Partido's long face lit up. "My goddaughter? Always." He stood up, gestured to the green leather armchair nearest his desk.

The office was enormous, fit for a founding partner of one of Wall Street's most successful small investment firms. It was decorated in what one of the mail-room clerks referred to as "late-early bank": big, maroon leather chairs, dark velvet drapes, heavy dark wood, brass fittings. On one side of the room a group of monitors displayed financial markets at a dizzying rate, tracking stocks, bonds, funds, commodities, currencies, metals markets rising and falling like the breath of a monster. A television with the sound muted was set on the Finance Channel; as a carefully coifed talking head explained about a dip currently occurring in the silver market, her close-captioned words scrolled across the bottom of the screen. The drapes were drawn across a set of picture windows, which made the line of monitors glow in the dimness. Despite central air conditioning the big room was stuffy, cave-like. Arthur Partido liked it that way.

"I've been looking over the financials for this company you're interested in," Partido said. He ran a meaty hand over his forehead. "This genetic engineering thing? How much do you know about that stuff?"

"I know that Genentech and some of the others are poised to be the big moneymakers in the next decade," Belinda said firmly.

"Ah-huh." Partido frowned. "Why's that?"

Belinda flashed her beautiful smile at her godfather. She ticked off points on the tips of her manicured fingers. "They're manufacturing drugs and feed for agricultural and medical uses. They're coming up with cosmetic uses—and RenanTech is working on using nanotechnology to attack genetic problems. They're—"

Partido shook his head. "I haven't talked to Bernard about this yet, but I think we have to say no to their financing request. The capital they need isn't much in the larger scale of things, but I see nothing here to persuade me that RenanTech is a good investment. Their prior financiers are withdrawing, their product development has hit snags—"

"The product is ninety percent there," Belinda protested. "It's only some last minute problems, and then they can file for FDA testing, and—"

"Belinda, I don't believe in fairy tales. If I really understood what this stuff was all about, maybe I'd feel differently, but this isn't like investing in a Microsoft or an Intel. It's too nebulous, too pie-in-the-sky. There are ethical issues that could come back to bite RenanTech later. What if Congress decides that this something or other they're developing is hazardous or unethical or something? Our investment is lost, without apology. Not to mention the company is run by a bunch of *scientists*." He grimaced in disgust. "Not one of 'em understands the bottom line, I'll bet. We've never gone in for anything like this, and—"

"Arthur, I've *researched*—"

"Belinda, every time we talk about RenanTech, you tell me all the markets that are waiting for their products, but you can't explain to me exactly what these people are doing with their DNA and their little germ-sized computers."

"But—" Belinda protested.

"I'm sorry. We're going to pass."

The room filled with silence. Belinda stared at the TV monitors unseeing, lost in thought. When Partido spoke again, she started slightly.

"Can I have Mrs. Hampshire bring you a cup of coffee?" he asked. "I'm already on number seven or eight ... I forget which."

Belinda shook her head. Her shoulder-length blonde hair stirred slightly with the motion. "Arthur, that stuff is going to kill you."

Partido smiled. "Hasn't yet. I'm doing pretty well for sixty-eight."

Belinda returned the smile, but her tone was sober. "Actually, can you give me an extra minute? There is something else we need to discuss." Partido nodded and watched as Belinda called her own secretary and asked her to bring something to his office.

"Another opportunity?" he asked mildly. He rang for another cup of coffee. "You're sure you don't want some, Belinda?"

She shook her head. The coffee, and a manila envelope tightly sealed with a sticker marked confidential, arrived at the same time. They waited until Mrs. Hampshire had left.

"So, what's this new opportunity?" Partido took a long, satisfying sip of coffee.

"You really should cut down on that stuff," she said, wrinkling her nose disapprovingly.

Partido settled himself into his chair. He was a big, blocky man; over the years, gravity had accentuated the jowls and the pouches under his eyes until he began to look like a particularly mournful basset hound. His shoulders were stooped from years of poring over ticker tape machines and computer monitors, and he had a sizable paunch that even excellent tailoring could not disguise. His forty-three years on Wall Street had been spent building a

financial empire—*not* going to the gym. Outside of making money, rumor was that the only other activity Arthur Partido was passionate about was painting, another extremely non-aerobic pastime.

“So, now we talk about my coffee consumption?” he asked.

“We *do* need to talk to about your health, Arthur,” Belinda insisted.

His dark, square eyebrows rose. “My health? Never better.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what the doctor says, Arthur. Your blood pressure’s high, your cholesterol level’s dangerously high, and you drink too much.”

Partido’s face went dark with anger. “Who the hell’s been telling you these lies?” he barked. “I had my insurance physical last month—I’m healthy as hell for a man my age.”

Belinda *tssked*, breaking open the seal on the envelope in her lap. “Arthur, I’m just concerned, you know?” She slid a sheaf of papers from the envelope and waved them at Partido. “From the doctor’s report, you could go any time —”

“*Where did you get that report?*” Partido thundered. “I told the doctor—”

“You *paid* the doctor to keep his mouth shut. To soft-pedal the liver damage and the blood pressure problems and the coronary blockage—did the doctor mention you’re *not* a candidate for angioplasty?—and send a *revised* report to the insurance company. And I paid the doctor *more* to release the real report to me. It’s that good old free enterprise system you and Grandfather taught me to love. What I don’t understand is why you even bothered. Wouldn’t you like a chance to go, I don’t know, live on a beach somewhere, drinking rum punch or something?”

“I’d rather go to hell,” Partido barked. “I love this. This is what I do.”

She shook her head sorrowfully. "That's nonsense, Arthur. This job is killing you. It's time you retired." Belinda's tone was solicitous, but her blue eyes were flinty.

"That's bull, Belinda! I've got years ahead of me—"

"No, Arthur, you don't," she said firmly. "That's my point. When Grandfather sees this report—"

Partido lunged forward, reaching for the papers. "He's not going to see the blasted report!"

Belinda opened her eyes very wide and smiled slightly, innocence personified. "But Arthur, if Grandfather and the insurance company don't see this report, that would constitute fraud. Filing a doctored physical with an insurer is a fraudulent action, as I'm sure you know. In the event of your death, Quayle-Partido wouldn't be able to collect on your life insurance policy—"

"I'm *not* dying!"

Belinda shook her head. "*Everyone* dies sooner or later, Arthur. And from the look of these reports ..." She smiled.

The heavy silence in the office was punctuated only by the occasional beep from one of the market-tracking monitors. Partido sat down heavily, his face turned away from Belinda.

"What do you want? Is this about me turning down RenanTech? Do you want me to reconsider? I could—"

"It's not just RenanTech, Arthur. I want you to live a long, healthy life ... away from Quayle-Partido." Belinda looked around the office thoughtfully. "This room would look so much better with lighter colors, less brass and leather. It's such an old money look, Arthur. It's old fashioned; clients want their money people to be more up to date."

It took a moment for the full import of her words to sink in. Arthur Partido's face flushed again. "Is that what you want? My office? *My* spot? I built this place!" He stopped and made an obvious effort to get himself under control. Belinda watched him blandly.

"Look, Belinda," Partido said at last. "You're going to be a partner here sooner or later, and I look forward to seeing that day. You're as sharp as your granddad, you'll bring a lot of youth and good ideas to the firm, I'm sure. But you haven't even been here a year. My God, this time last year you hadn't received your MBA yet. Give yourself a little time—"

"I've *given* myself a little time, Arthur." Belinda's smile was glittering, icy. "I've given myself almost a year. I don't want to wait any longer. Now ..." Her tone became warmly helpful, as if she were giving directions to a hopelessly lost tourist. "... you can do this one of two ways. You can announce your retirement, get the gold watch and the stock options and the handsome pension and retire a very rich man ... or someone can mail the real results of your physical to Hammersmith Life and Casualty, who I'm sure would be delighted to cancel your insurance policy, maybe even turn you in to the police for fraud. And they'd certainly alert my grandfather that his partner and friend of forty-odd years has lapsed in his fiduciary duty to the corporation. Which way do you want to go?"

"This is blackmail!" Partido's face reddened again.

Belinda nodded. "Is that what you call it? I've seen you and Grandfather use the same tactics over the years; I thought they'd kind of be homey and comforting to you on your way out. And you're getting rather self-righteous for someone who conspired to commit fraud against the insurance company. I'm sure your doctor will sell you even further down the river in a heartbeat, if it means he won't lose his license." She stood up and turned to look at the room. "This room definitely needs to go lighter. Get rid of those horrible dark drapes, all the leather."

"I like it the way it is!" Partido protested. He put a hand to his forehead and his eyebrows knit together as if he had a headache.

"Arthur, you have to stay focused. This isn't going to be your office, it's going to be mine. What you want really doesn't matter. We just have to resolve how you're leaving."

Partido turned to look at Belinda, pain and incomprehension written on his face. "Why are you doing this, Belinda? I've always loved you like my own—I was at your graduation, I took you to museums ..." He gestured at the small collection of framed photographs on his desk; prominent among them was a picture of a younger Arthur Partido hugging a pre-adolescent Belinda dressed in riding clothes. "I even went to every one of those blasted horse shows with your grandfather."

"It's really nothing personal," Belinda said coolly. "It's just time you got out of my way."

"My God, my God." Partido stood up, hands to his head. "I don't—I won't—I—" His face contorted. He sat down again heavily, his head flung back against the maroon leather of his armchair. "I feel sick."

Belinda turned around to look at him with interest. "You look terrible," she said. "Your face is bright red. Do you need help?" She didn't move.

Partido shuddered. "I don't feel ..." he began, and groped for the phone. Casually, Belinda moved it just out of his reach. "Please, I really ..." One corner of his mouth began to tremble, then went slack.

"Before I can get a doctor, Arthur, we need to resolve the problem of your leaving. Just let me know how you want to play it."

Partido slumped sideways in his chair. The arm he had reached toward the phone slid heavily off the desk. His eyes stayed on Belinda, eloquent with fear, imploring her to act.

"Arthur? Nothing to say?"

Belinda reached down to pick up the envelope she had brought in with her. "Maybe it's better this way. It's really very graceful of you, Arthur; *I* wouldn't have thought of it.

You die, Q-P gets the insurance money, we save the cost of a gold watch, and I get your office.”

Partido’s eyes seemed to be the only part of him left alive. His gaze did not leave Belinda’s face, and after a few moments it appeared to rankle her.

“Don’t look at me that way,” she said sharply. “I’m not the one who drank a dozen cups of coffee a day and never got any exercise. This only confirms what your doctor said. It’s a shame Hammersmith Casualty won’t know that. Well ...” she finished brightly, “... I think my work is done. Thanks for the chat, Arthur. It’s been lovely.”

She turned and left, taking care to close the door behind her.

In the antechamber, Belinda turned and smiled at Mrs. Hampshire. “Boy, is *he* in a mood! He asked not to be disturbed, and I sure wouldn’t go in there if I were you!” She waggled the envelope in her hand at the secretary. “Ciao!”

From *The Daily Bugle*, February 7th, “Wall Street Transitions” column:

“In the wake of the sudden death last month of Arthur Partido, founding partner of Quayle-Partido Financial, Inc., it was announced today that Belinda Quayle, granddaughter of founding partner Bernard Quayle, has been made a full partner in the firm. Ms. Quayle, who holds an M.B.A. from Wharton and a B.A. from Harvard, joined Quayle-Partido nine months ago.

“ ‘I am delighted, at this sad time for our company, to be able to bring Belinda in as a partner,’ said Bernard Quayle. ‘While we grieve at the loss of my friend Arthur Partido, Belinda has been

groomed for partnership in this firm for some time, and we are confident that her youthful energy and viewpoint will be an invaluable asset to the company....’ “



Today

It was a perfect June night. The heat of the day had gentled, and the air slid soft as silk over the skin. The sky was a clear deep cobalt blue, as dark as a New York City sky could get, lit as it was by the reflected heat of the city itself. A few valiant stars shone overhead, nestled into the arc of the waning moon. The neon lights glowed in jewel colors: ruby and emerald, topaz and diamond white; further east the towers of Midtown were backlit by an orange glow, the city's ambient light.

The perfect sky and the stars were wasted on the man on the roof. He knew about the neon signs from their distant heat and unrelenting buzz, just audible to him under the louder noises of the city. At this hour—close to 1 A.M.—the most obvious city sounds were diminishing. He heard the lonely, haunting wail of an ambulance siren forty-two blocks south; the start-and-stop gasp of MTA buses wending their way up and down town; the rhythmic rattle of the subways that rose up through the gratings. If he stood perfectly still, he thought he could hear the heart of Manhattan island itself, a beat made up of the pulses of a million people, of the slap of the Hudson and East Rivers against the shore, of the bass hum of the electricity and water and steam that coursed underground.

The man on the roof sat back, head up, tasting the cool air. He wore red, a formfitting costume that covered him from head to toe, supple enough to follow his every motion and define every muscle of his powerful frame. High on his chest, in a darker red, two squared-off letter Ds were interlocked like links of chainmail. On his head, just above his eyebrows, two tiny horns gave him a demonic appearance. Despite the evil look, though, he was one of the good guys, and good guys rarely get a break. So he was savoring this moment, drinking in the sweetness of the night.

The faint breeze carried a whole language of scents: people in buildings nearby, bread baking in the shabby Italian bakery at street level, the faint smell of ginkgo trees. Someone had imported ginkgoes from China, he remembered, because they were tough, grew in bad soil, with little water and no care: the perfect New York City tree. There was a metaphor in there somewhere, he thought, but he wasn't feeling philosophical enough to chase it down. For just a few minutes, he wanted to enjoy sitting, listening, feeling, and smelling this city he loved, in spite of everything he knew about it.

Especially *this* part of the city—Hell's Kitchen, Midtown, West Side. It was a neighborhood that had stubbornly resisted redevelopment and gentrification, and still looked much the same way it had when he was a kid. Back when he could still see it. Years ago.

He'd been known around the neighborhood then as Battlin' Jack Murdock's kid, Matt, and he'd been proud of it, proud of his well-intentioned, careworn father, a third-tier prizefighter who struggled to raise his kid to be something more. While his father sparred in practice matches with guys who got younger and faster every year, the boy had stayed home, studying to make his father proud. While his father did small, nasty jobs for the bosses who ran the fight game in Hell's Kitchen, the boy reluctantly turned his back on stickball and football and the thousand made-up-on-the-spot games kids played on the street, turned his back on their taunts and the names they called him, to make the honor roll and make his father proud. And one night, when his son had been in the audience, Battlin' Jack Murdock had refused to take the dive his bosses demanded of him—to return the favor, to make his son Matthew proud. He'd died because of it, and thought it worth the cost.

And his son couldn't even see the smile on his father's dead lips, because by that time young Matthew was blind. There had been a crossing, an elderly man hobbling across the street, and a truck rattling too fast through the streets of Hell's Kitchen because it was carrying an illegal load of radioactive waste. When the boy ran into the street to save the old man (because that's what his father expected his son to do), one of the canisters of waste had leaked, splashing the boy's eyes, blinding him permanently.

It had taken him years to fully understand that he wasn't like any other blind man or woman in the world. The radioactive gunk that had stolen his sight had somehow enhanced his other senses exponentially, left him in a chaotic whirl of input, living in his own private funhouse where sound, smell, touch and taste were explosive, overwhelming. But because his father refused to give up, and refused to let him give up, Matthew kept studying, learned to cope as a blind man in a seeing world.

When Battlin' Jack Murdock died, though—that had been brutal. Matt kept studying because he'd promised his father he would, but if it hadn't been for a few decent people in a tough neighborhood, he might have given up. And it took another man—as tough as Jack Murdock had been, and as determined to make something of Matt—to see the boy's extraordinary potential, understand his gifts, and keep him from sinking into despair and rage. Stick, a tough-talking martial artist, part sensei and part drill instructor, had helped Matt find his way out of the chaos. Stick had trained Matt, taught him to harness the sensory information that threatened to overwhelm him. When Stick was done with him, he was able to read his world in a way he never could with his eyes. Now Matt could “see” in 360 degrees—for miles. He could track a heartbeat through a thicket of heartbeats, follow a scent, read words printed on rice paper with his fingertips. Stick had given Matt the world again.

For his father's sake he trained his mind; under Stick's tutelage he trained his body. The daylight Matt went to college, became a lawyer; the nighttime Matt went to the gym, studied martial arts, became a world-class gymnast. And at last he'd put on a mask and a suit, and taken a name: Daredevil. He had gone out to keep his neighborhood safe from the kinds of men who'd killed his father. What goes around comes around.

All that was in the back of Daredevil's thoughts as he sat, drinking in the taste of the night, but he wasn't really dwelling on the past right now. He wasn't even thinking about bad guys. It was so rare, one of those perfect, quiet moments, that Daredevil succumbed to temptation and reined in his hypersenses for a moment, stopped making sense of the world around him. He let himself remember what it was to see: his father's seamed, battered face; the pinched, vague face of Sister Agnesa, the Polish nun who taught geography at St. Bridget's High School; the ruffled edges of his baseball cards in the old shoe box he kept under his bed. And color! The clear, sharp blue of an autumn sky, the pink of Mary Heaney's new sweater, the yellow yolk of his egg at breakfast just before his fork bit into it, and the rusty red of his own tousled hair. He remembered color like a half-forgotten language. Even the senses that came after sight had not compensated him for the loss of blue, red, and yellow.

He let himself remember for a moment, not the loss, but the joy of it. Then, because he was still on patrol, Daredevil focused his attention on the way sounds and the touch of air on his skin told him everything about the rooftop he was on; the neighborhood; the city.

By day, lawyer, friend, even lover. By night, Daredevil.
Not bad for a skinny blind kid from Hell's Kitchen.

It was a perfect June night. Lucie Arvelho and Rick Gehry had gone to the late show at the Clinton Multiplex, and now were sitting in the empty plaza outside the theater, eating ice cream. The Multiplex was part of a big office complex on 50th Street and Eighth Avenue, on the very fringes of Hell's Kitchen; the complex had never quite caught on, and the Multiplex had been reduced to showing second-run movies at three dollars a seat. Since the show got out, Lucie and Rick had been sitting in the plaza, doing the complex behavioral samba called The First Date.

They were both junior draughtsmen at a big graphic design firm in Soho that paid as though glamour were something that you could eat. A three-dollar movie and ice cream was just about what each of them could afford ... if they went Dutch. Rick had nervously told a string of stories so funny Lucie's face hurt from laughing. She wasn't a big talker, a little shy in fact, but Rick was so funny she found herself telling stories in return. When she talked about growing up, her huge complicated family and their expectation that she'd marry some guy just like her brothers and settle down, he listened sympathetically. He was only a few inches taller than she was, and slightly built; his straight fair hair was pulled into one of those ponytails that no one but mobsters on TV wore anymore, but on him it looked cute, a little artistic.

Girl, you're losing it, Lucie told herself. She didn't care.

He was an only child, he told her. Different bundle of problems. He sounded wistful, as if having six brothers and three sisters might be a better deal than Lucie had always thought it.

She looked around, pushing a long strand of dark hair out of her eyes. The plaza was empty—it was almost 1:30 in the morning, and even the ice cream guy had shuttered up his little stand and gone home. There was a pleasantly awkward silence between them, as if both of them knew what was coming. Lucie's dark-eyed gaze met his, and

suddenly she wanted to do a lot more than kissing. But a kiss was a start.

He slid his arm around her shoulders; she leaned into it and turned her face up toward him. It felt as though the air between them were charged with electricity. She closed her eyes and smiled a little, waiting for the kiss.

It was worth waiting for. Within a few seconds they were totally lost in each other. Lucie thought of her studio apartment, and her two roommates—then forgot about them when Rick kissed her again.

Then he pulled away suddenly. Lucie opened her eyes, stunned by the abruptness of it. And screamed.

Rick was dangling, arms and legs flailing, by his collar. He was held at arm's length by a huge man, maybe a foot taller than Rick, massively muscled, and dressed all in black. He wasn't wearing a costume, at least not something deliberate like the Green Goblin or the Gladiator or Venom or any of the masked bad guys Lucie had read about in the papers. His clothes were black, he wore a black cap, or maybe a ski mask, rolled down to just above his mouth. Big, squarish head, thick neck, and a wide, crazy smile. Lucie couldn't help cataloguing details with her artist's eye, at the same moment that she shrank back against the pebbled concrete of the bench.

"Luce, run!" Rick gasped.

At the sound of Rick's voice, the man in black brought his right hand up as if to display to Lucie what he held in it. It was a knife the length of Lucie's forearm, black and wickedly edged. She screamed again.

The man in black smiled. Almost casually, he reached around, drove the knife into Rick's throat, and dragged it down, slicing through the ribcage, ripping him open.

"Oh, yeah, Luce, run," the big man said. His voice was big, too, and low. It sounded like the words were funny to him. He raised his arm and jiggled Rick's body as if it weighed nothing, like a toy skeleton.

Lucie backed away, almost fell over one of the concrete benches. A minute ago she and Rick had been sitting on that bench. Kissing.

Moaning, Lucie turned and ran, heading toward the courtyard's 50th Street exit. She had to jump over another bench, then scramble up the side of a low concrete wall, edged with flowers that glowed an ugly orange in the halogen street light. She didn't look back.

Then a hand was on her shoulder, this huge paw that closed effortlessly tighter and tighter, until she felt her bones cracking under it. She shrieked in pain, tried not to turn around, but the hand spun her, and there was the big man, all in black, only his crazy smile visible. Lucie moaned again and tried to back away until the concrete of another of those stupid benches bit into her calf.

"Done running?" the big man asked. "That's nice. We can play a little before it's time to—"

Lucie stumbled backward over the bench, landing hard on the shoulder her assailant hadn't hurt. The pain was horrible. She cried out—then, in a moment of inspiration, rolled sideways, so that she was wedged in, partially hidden by the bench itself. Her torso was under the thing, anyway, and despite the pain she managed to keep her head mostly tucked under, too.

The big man growled impatiently. "You're wasting time, Luce. Come out, *now*." He slashed with the knife and cut her leg just above the knee; for a long moment it didn't hurt. *Maybe it didn't hurt Rick*, she thought wildly. *Maybe*

Another slicing downward movement, and this time by luck the attacker caught her across the cheek. She could feel the flap of skin moving, and the blood running in a hot rivulet along the side of her face. She was screaming and screaming and no one was coming, and the knife came down again and again, and she couldn't hide forever, and no one was coming—

Then she heard a soft thud beside the bench, and she opened her eyes in time to see the knife—that huge, black knife—go sailing past her and into the plants on top of the winding concrete half-wall. Weakly, Lucie struggled to move enough to see what was going on. In the pink glare of the high-intensity halogen lights she saw two men now, the one who'd attacked her, and another man, not as big but moving fast. He wore a red suit molded to his muscular frame, and moved like a dancer, or one of those guys in a Jackie Chan movie.

Omigod, Daredevil, she thought. And fainted dead away.

When the first scream split the crystal calm of the night, Daredevil was up and moving before the conscious impulse to do so hit him. He vaulted from one roof to the next, gauging the distance between them effortlessly, diving headfirst from a fire escape, then curling into a somersault to break his fall on an awning. His sensitive ears heard the strain in the laminated fabric as his near-200 pounds made impact, and instantly he rolled to one side and off the awning, rather than let it absorb the whole of his fall. From the ground, he leapt onto the back of a yellow cab—he felt the cab skew as the driver turned once to see what that *thud* had been—and let it carry him four blocks south before he jumped off, grabbed at a fire escape, and swung himself up again, heading east toward the screams. He smelled blood, too. A lot of it. Whoever was screaming wasn't doing it for her health; something nasty was going down. Daredevil increased his speed, made his leaps just a little broader, trying to cut a second or two, to get there quicker.

As he crossed Ninth Avenue, he could feel the heat of the halogen lights that washed the Clinton Plaza courtyard; the coppery smell of blood was strong. Daredevil swung up the side of the Clinton Tower and onto the roof of the Multiplex.

Not as flashy as Spider-Man, maybe, but not too shabby, he thought.

From the roof he paused long enough to get a read on what was happening below in the courtyard. Two people, no, make that three, but one was dead, cooling rapidly. The screaming woman was half hidden under the cold concrete of a bench, and her attacker, a very big, powerfully-built man, was trying to drive her out. Daredevil calculated the distance and dived confidently off the theater roof, shaping the arc of his leap so that he somersaulted midair and landed crouched on his feet at the side of the attacker.

Or was it attackers? He'd been sure the big man was alone, but now he was picking up something else—an echo of the woman's heartbeat where the big man had been. But she was still under the bench, still screaming. His hypersenses—the fusion of all his senses that he thought of as his personal radar—confirmed his first impression that the man was big. From above, a quick read had put the assailant's height at close to 6' 8", and his weight at more than 250 pounds; and that additional foot or so at the end of his right arm had read as a very large, nasty knife. There wasn't time right now to sort out the conflicting reports his senses were relaying to him. Daredevil's first job was to stop Big Ugly here from chasing the lady under the bench.

"Heads up, Charming," he said. It was hardly sparkling repartee, but it achieved its desired effect: it got Big Ugly to turn away from the bench to face him.

"More party!" the big man said. He sounded delighted.

Great, Daredevil thought. *He likes to fight. Okay, pal, then party it is.*

Daredevil dropped into a one-kneel crouch and aimed a sweeping kick at the big man's knees. The kick should have broken the guy's knees, but the big man leapt effortlessly back and the kick connected with nothing. Now Big Ugly stepped in, swinging the knife like a scythe, back and forth.

Not an artistic technique, Daredevil thought—and he had studied enough martial arts to be a connoisseur. He leapt backward himself, onto one of the concrete benches scattered across the courtyard, and pulled his billy club from its restraining strap on his thigh. With an upward sweep of his hand he snapped the billy together and parried the knife's cutting sweep, forcing the attacker's arm into a spiral movement that should have thrown the knife out of his hand.

It didn't. Not because the guy knew what he was doing, though.

The man pulled his arm back and stepped back again. Again, Daredevil sensed the woman's heartbeat from two places, a double-time pounding in front of him, and a sluggish pulse low and to the left of him. There was no scent from the big man, no sweat, and something was wrong with the way his body read—as if his height and the length of his arms shifted and changed as they moved. Daredevil couldn't afford the time to sort it out: the woman who had been screaming was quiet now—from the chill of her body and her sluggish pulse, he suspected she'd fainted, maybe from shock, maybe from blood loss. In any case, she wasn't in good shape. She needed help.

The assailant had moved back several feet, out of Daredevil's range. He was swashing the knife back and forth again, and chuckling softly. High and lonely in the distance, a police siren warbled.

Heading this way, Daredevil realized. *Hope they brought an ambulance.*

Behind and to the left, the woman shifted a little and groaned.

The big man turned his head. "You're next, Luce," he growled.

In that split second of diversion, Daredevil launched himself feetfirst at the attacker's head, slicing through the

air with incredible force. The impact should knock the guy cold, and by the time the cops got there—

—but he didn't connect.

Daredevil crashed to the concrete, smashing the side of his head on the wall of a pebbled cement planter with almost the same force he'd aimed at his opponent. He scrambled to his feet, struggling to get his bearings. His ears rang, his balance was off—and where was the bad guy? How had he missed him?

Daredevil swung around as the guy closed in, knife first. Daredevil swiveled around and placed a perfect kick on the knife's hilt. This time, the knife went flying, clattering to the ground a good thirty feet away. The big man let out a yelp of surprise and pain.

"All right, longjohns, we'll do it without the blade."

"We won't do it at all," Daredevil parried.

Judging by the radial pulse emanating from his wrists, the big man was coming toward him with arms open as if ready to embrace his foe. Seven feet away and down on the ground, Daredevil heard the same heartbeat, felt with the invisible radar of his hypersenses the exact position of another body relative to his own. The woman's heartbeat again. The heartbeat in front of Daredevil sank to nothing, then pounded again with a difference: a new rhythm to the left—but his radar sense told Daredevil that the big man was still coming from the right.

That knock on the head, Daredevil thought. Got to focus.

The big man stepped in, his arms closing as if to gather Daredevil to him. Instead, the man in red dropped out of the embrace and drove his fist up into his attacker's sternum. He had the satisfaction of hearing an anguished "Auuuffh!" from the man as he stumbled back. Then the heartbeat stopped.

Stopped.

I didn't kill him. Not with that blow, not this guy.

Daredevil stood still for a moment, reading the woman's pulse and heat signature, locating the cooling flesh of the corpse twenty feet in front of him, searching for the bad guy.

Police sirens dopplered as the cars rounded the Ninth Avenue corner.

Ahead, Daredevil caught a sudden flurry of motion—the big guy scaling the wall of the Multiplex. He'd retrieved his knife. Behind Daredevil, the woman groaned.

"Later, Devil-boy," the big man growled.

The voice came from the roof of the Multiplex, but Daredevil had only the vaguest sense of him there: no scent, only a minimal heat signature, and a heartbeat that shifted from place to place and rhythm to rhythm, even dropped out entirely.

What is this guy, a zombie?

As the big man began to move across the roof, two squad cars screeched into the Plaza. Normally, Daredevil could hear heartbeat, footfall, breathing even under a barrage of squealing brakes and howling sirens, but not tonight. For just a second he lost the man's trail.

Three uniforms dashed from the cars, weapons drawn, looking for the trouble. One of them pointed his .38 at Daredevil.

"Freeze!" the cop shouted.

Daredevil froze—chin raised, trying to catch a sound, a scent, something that would put him on the attacker's trail again. Nothing.

"Royo, you moron, he's not the perp!" an older cop yelled. "Hey, DD, where's the bad guy?"

He listened for another moment, then turned to the older cop. "Gone," he said at last. "Left two victims. One's there—" He gestured toward the corpse. "The other's here. She's hurt, but I didn't have time to find out how badly."

The cops were holstering their guns now. The third cop had taken the young officer aside and was talking to him

quietly. Daredevil didn't need hypersenses to know that the kid was getting a lecture on cooperation between the police force and Hell's Kitchen's own guardian. Officially, Daredevil was an unsanctioned vigilante, working in a precinct that historically didn't cotton to costumed crime-fighters. The lieutenant at Midtown South, Romeo Golden, had gone on record more than once opposing the intrusion of paranormals into law enforcement, and there were plenty of cops who had trouble with anyone who worked without a badge. But in the last few months that attitude seemed to be softening a bit. Many of the rank-and-file uniforms working Hell's Kitchen seemed to appreciate that Daredevil worked parallel to the law, that their jobs were sometimes easier because this particular vigilante saw their turf as his own. As Royo got the lecture he was kneeling to examine the woman wedged between the bench and the concrete wall.

"Hey, Singer! She's alive! Call EMS!"

The senior cop was already calling it in, requesting an ambulance, the coroner's wagon, a crime scene unit. He looked up again. "DD, you got a description of the guy?"

"Tall, six-eight, about 250 pounds, none of it fat. He was masked, gloved—you won't find prints." *And he doesn't sweat, and his heartbeat starts and stops on command*, he added to himself. But that was foolish. It was probably that knock on the head that made him hear phantom heartbeats. He heard murmurs; the woman was conscious. "She can probably tell you more than I can. One more thing: he may have known her. He called her Luce."

The cop started to say thanks, but Daredevil was already gone, vaulting up the side of the Multiplex and onto the roof. No scent, but in the dirt and dust of the roof he found disturbances—footprints. Vibram-soled shoes; looked like they were off the shelf. Unlike some masked bad guys, this guy didn't seem to require theme-park tailoring.

“Okay, Mr. Off-the-Rack,” he muttered. “What else did you leave behind?” But the answer was nothing. No scent, no fibers, a few footprints he thought were probably the big guy’s but could as easily belong to an usher at the Multiplex who might have come up to the roof.

His head hurt. He felt queasy. Familiar side effects of a blow to the head. It bothered him to lose this guy. It bothered him that his body, the machine he had honed as a weapon against the darkness that infested the city, had let him down. It bothered him because he had failed to protect the city, failed to put away another threat to the civil peace. He didn’t like failure.

“I owe you one,” he said aloud.

In the Clinton Plaza courtyard, Lucie Arvalho was conscious and shivering. They’d moved her out from her hiding place and one of the policemen had brought a blanket from his squad car to cover her: The policemen were sweating in the warm night air, but Lucie was as cold as she’d ever been in her life. She tried not to look toward the gray form crumpled up in the rear of the courtyard. Rick. A tear cut through the grime on her cheek.

“Why did he do this?” she whimpered.

The young policeman was sitting with her, trying to be comforting at the same time that he asked for information. “Did you know the assailant, ma’am?” he asked.

Lucie started to shake her head, but that opened the slash on her face. “No,” she managed. “I don’t think so. I couldn’t be sure, he was wearing a mask. But he was so big.”

The older cop had joined them. “He was calling you by name, ma’am.”

Lucie looked up at him bewilderedly. “How did you know—Oh. *He* told you. He saved my life, did he tell you that?”

The cops exchanged glances. “Daredevil?” the older cop shook his head. “That’s probably not the sort of thing he’d

mention. Do you know how the attacker knew your name?"

Lucie tried to remember, but she couldn't separate that one memory from the rest, the horror of seeing Rick cut open, the terror of knowing that she was meant to be next. At last she said, "I think ... Rick told me to run. He called me by my name."

She began to cry. It hurt.

"It's okay, you've been very brave." The cop looked at his hands as if he wanted to pat her but was afraid he'd make her hurt worse. "You've had a rough time, but you hold on now. You just hold on. It's going to be okay."

Lucie closed her eyes. It was a kind lie, kindly meant. But how could anything ever be okay again?

His head was still ringing, he still felt queasy, but Daredevil swept the neighborhood for another hour, seeking some clue, some shred of sensory input that would take him to the big man's doorstep. If he thought it out logically, of course, this wasn't the best time to tangle with the guy. His timing was ragged, his hypersenses obviously weren't firing right. But he couldn't let that stop him; Matt Murdock hadn't been raised to let an obstacle stop him from doing the right thing. So Daredevil continued through Hell's Kitchen, moving swiftly from rooftop to rooftop, pausing to listen, scent, reach out with his senses.

But the thought wouldn't leave him: what had happened tonight? Why hadn't he been able to keep a fix on his opponent?

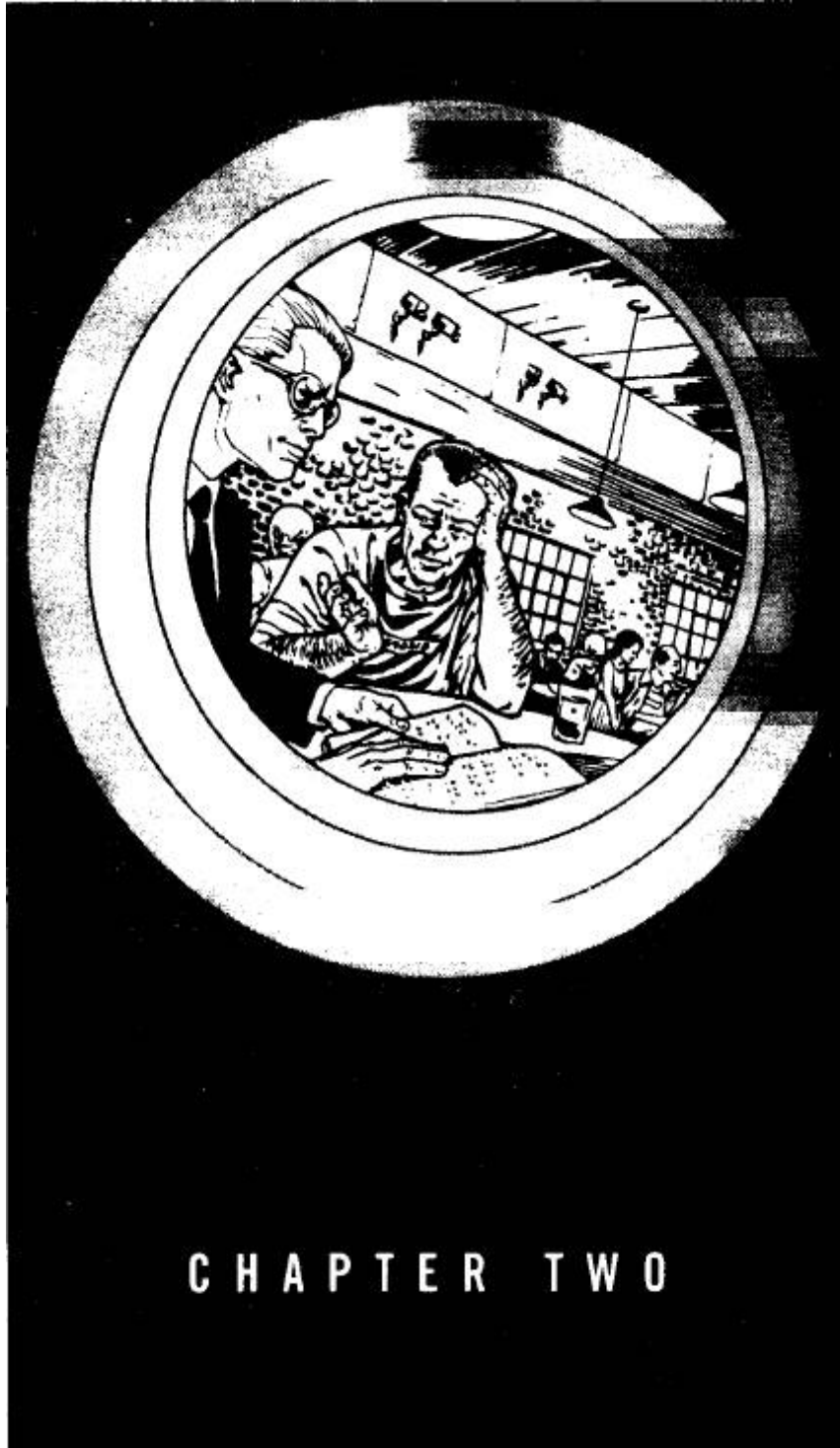
It was an aberration, probably the knock on the head had done it. Because if that wasn't the answer, it could mean that something else was happening, something that could threaten his work as Daredevil, even his life as Matt Murdock. But his senses seemed to be working fine now—which meant that he could feel every separate nerve on the left side of his face protest at each movement he made.

Near to 4 A.M., he gave up and headed for home, and Karen.

She was asleep when he crept in through the window. As always, the first thing he detected was her scent, the light floral of her perfume and shampoo, the warmer smell of her skin. For him, it filled the room like a bouquet of roses. The scent of home, as much as the smells of the city. He and Karen had had some rough times; once, for a long time, he thought he'd lost her to the darkness, and to his own inability to let anyone get too close. Now, every time he came home and simply found her there, sleeping with her hair fanned across the pillow, he was grateful all over again.

Don't ever let me lose you, he thought.

He shook his head, shrugging off the thought, stripped off the mask and costume, stowed them away, and dropped into bed, wincing as his head hit the pillow. Another perfect June evening.



CHAPTER TWO

When the alarm went off at 7:30, Matt slapped at it groggily. He'd bought the clock with the loudest, most annoying alarm he could find, specifically for mornings like this, mornings when he'd been up too late for too many nights running. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed he considered the size of the sleep-debt he owed to his body.

Ah, well. He stood up, stretched—and immediately regretted it. The stretch started the throbbing on the left side of his face again. With knowledge born of long experience, he realized there wasn't much he could do for the pain except stop stretching. Maybe a shower. He ran his sensitive fingertips along the line of his jaw and up over his temple, eye ridge, cheekbone and nose, assessing the damage. A good deal of swelling. Nothing broken, no abrasions; the mask had taken the brunt of the friction. He probably looked pretty gruesome, but he couldn't let that stop him. He had a full day ahead, including a morning at Rykers Island interviewing a new client. They were going to love that shiner at Rykers.

Pleading "blind man walked into the door" again, your honor. Whistling softly, he headed to the bathroom.

The application of steam and hot water eased the tension in his neck and shoulders, but shaving was not fun. As he was finishing his shower he heard Karen waking in the bedroom, heard the radio snap on, heard her shuffle toward the kitchen to make coffee, then come back, the cup and saucer clinking pleasantly against each other, to settle back among the pillows and listen to the news.

Matt tuned the announcer out, preferring to imagine Karen, her fair hair tousled and her face still set in the expression of faint bewilderment that she wore before the first cup of coffee. Pictured how her smile would look when he came out to say good morning. He knew that smile by touch, by the way it changed her voice, but could only imagine what it looked like. He wrapped a towel around his

waist and went into the bedroom, carefully toweling the last moisture out of his hair.

"Morning, hero." Karen reached up to kiss him, then drew back. "Oh, geez, Matt! What did you do to yourself?"

He grinned at her. It hurt a lot, but it was bearable. "Is it bad?"

She shook her head, releasing a little of its warm fragrance. "It's impressive. What did you *do*?"

"I bumped into a wall," he said, mock-mournfully.

"And this Cutter guy was at the other end of it?" she asked.

Matt sat down beside her on the bed and let Karen explore his bruises with gentle fingers. "What Cutter guy?"

"You don't know?" Karen leaned past him to turn the radio up. "They'll be repeating the story in a minute."

As they listened to the traffic and weather, Karen described the black eye, the bruise that extended from his cheekbone to his temple. "Must have been one hell of a wall—" she began. Then, "Hush, here it comes."

"... a savage attack in Hell's Kitchen early this morning left a man dead and his companion badly hurt, saved by the intervention of the vigilante hero Daredevil, who drove the assailant off."

"I was—we were just sitting there." Matt recognized the tearful voice of the woman from Clinton Plaza immediately. *"This man attacked us out of nowhere. He carved Rick up, sliced him open, and he'd have done the same thing to me if Daredevil hadn't stopped him ..."*

Karen slid her arm around Matt's shoulders. "Yaaaay for the good guy," she said softly.

The announcer's voice came back again. *"Police are offering a reward for any information leading to the capture of the man they're calling The Cutter—"*

Matt snorted. "They've given him a name?"

"So, he was the wall you ran into?" Karen asked.

Matt nodded. It hurt again. He ignored it. "In a manner of speaking. I jumped where I thought he was, and he wasn't. A wall was."

Karen turned the radio off. "Ouch. The guy moves that fast?"

Matt nodded again. "Fast. And weird. I lost him at the end because I couldn't track him. So much of the way I use my hypersenses is automatic, I hardly notice how I'm doing it anymore. But last night I had to keep noticing, pushing myself to make sense of the sensory input. And sometimes it made no sense. It was like—" He tried to think of how to describe it. "Ever try to touch mercury? You put your finger on it and it's not there? That's what this was like. I should have been able to take him down," he finished.

"Oh, Matt." She understood. Someone else might not have, but after everything they'd been through together, Karen understood what the failure meant to him. "Is everything okay now?"

"I think so." He stood up, reading the room, the street downstairs, separating out the hundreds of sounds in a one-block radius, the thrum of the elevators in their building and other buildings nearby, all the familiar sounds. "Mrs. Keine-man's refrigerator is not long for this world," he observed. "And the Hazzards have a new cat."

Karen threw a pillow at him. He caught it.

"Yeesh. I don't have to worry about you," she said. "Except"—she grabbed the shirt he had just taken from the closet—"when you want to wear that shirt with a blue suit. Where are you off to?" She handed him another shirt.

"Rykers. Sister Maggie called me yesterday from St. Bridget's, insisted I had to take on a case. A guy from Hell's Kitchen, busted on an assault charge. Maggie says it's completely bogus—"

"And you believe Maggie," Karen finished.

He shrugged sheepishly. His relationship with the nun who ran St. Bridget's homeless shelter was complicated,

but there was a bond of secrets and trust there that he could not ignore. When Sister Maggie called, Matt Murdock listened. "I've got a couple of other clients at Rykers I need to touch bases with, too. I've been trying to schedule meetings all day so I can stay out of the office. This tie okay?"

"The tie is fine. They're still painting the office?"

"Endlessly. The fumes play havoc with my sniffer."

Karen laughed and went through a quick routine, straightening Matt's collar and tie, squaring the shoulders of his suit jacket. The tidying wasn't necessary, but she did it anyway. He stood still, letting her fuss, humming softly.

"What is that tune? You've been humming it for weeks." She brushed an imaginary lock of hair off his forehead, smoothed the dark red hair at the nape of his neck, then laced her fingers behind his head and put her head on his shoulder.

"Remember when you rented *Henry V*? It's the *Non Nobis* hymn they used in the battlefield scene. *Non nobis, Domine, Domine, Non nobis, Domine, Sed Nomini, Sed Nomini, Tuo da Glorium*," he sang. "I don't know, maybe it's junior high Latin coming out in me." He hummed a few bars.

"Show off. I bet you even know what it means."

"If I told you what it meant, *that* would be showing off." Matt grinned. "I think we had to sing it in choir, but I don't remember liking it so much then. Maybe it just works better when you've got a little life experience under your belt."

Karen nodded. "It certainly works in the movie when you see the carnage on the battlefield," she said softly. "Triumph and hell, all at once. I wish you could have seen it."

"Shakespeare does a great job of describing it for the visually impaired," Matt said lightly. "And that—"

"—is why he's Shakespeare," they finished together.

"Do you have time for coffee?" Karen stood away from him.

"I wish I did, but Steve's picking me up any minute now for the drive to Rykers." He took her hand. "How about dinner tonight before you go off to do your broadcast? In a real restaurant. Like grownups."

"I *love* you!" He could feel the warmth of her smile, the quick beat of her heart as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "Dinner would be terrific."

"I *love you*." He kissed the hand he still held. "Off to Rykers. Another day in Fun City."

"Have fun storming the castle!" she called after him.

Matt was driven out to Rykers Island by an investigator kept on retainer by his law firm, Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock. It was possible to reach the island by public transportation—inmates' visitors did it all the time—but for a lawyer it was impractical, not to say a massive pain in the butt. On a good day, a visit to Rykers ate up four to five hours, minimum. On a bad day ... if you got there late, or a prisoner was in the can during head check and they shut the whole place down, or the universe simply decided to demonstrate the workings of Murphy's Law on an institutional scale, visiting Rykers could take ten or twelve hours. If hiring an investigator at \$40 an hour to drive him saved Matt three or four hours of billable time ... "Do the math," senior partner Rosalind Sharpe had said. And in this case, Rosalind was right.

If it had ever grated on Matt to be shepherded through the Rykers intake procedure by Steve Zdinak, he had long since become accustomed to it. In turn, Zdinak, a short, stocky man on the cusp of fifty with a beard coming in salt-and-pepper and a nervous habit of prying at things until he got the information he needed, had learned that Matt really needed very little help other than the driving itself. And Zdinak was a decent enough guy not to make a fuss over

the black-and-blues on Matt's face; he'd seen the lawyer turn up with bruises before, and accepted at face value his explanation that he was clumsy as well as blind. So after the usual "good mornings" had been exchanged, Matt settled himself in the back of Zdinak's highly polished brown LeSabre, took out his Walkman, and listened to the audio-taped files his secretary had messengered over last evening.

He listened as the car threaded through traffic on the FDR, then over to Queens and across the bridge to Rykers. Kept listening as the car was stopped at the first checkpoint. They inspected the trunk, then they came 'round to examine the ID of both driver and lawyer. Matt fished out his wallet and handed over the Office of Court Administration ID and the one from the Department of Corrections. The officer working checkpoint examined them closely, then handed them back and waved them through and over to the parking lot.

"Which building you going to, Mr. Murdock?" Zdinak asked as he parked the LeSabre.

"House of Detention," Matt told him.

Zdinak opened the door, waited for Matt to replace his files and tape recorder in the briefcase, then guided him toward the bus heading for the House of Detention for Men, where male prisoners above the age of twenty-three were held. Matt went through a metal detector, and again, before boarding the bus, produced the IDs from OCA and DOC. Zdinak, who was going to C-95, the hospital building, to interview a suspect in one of Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock's other cases, agreed to meet Matt back in the parking lot in three hours' time.

The bus was a regular DOC vehicle, really just a schoolbus with barred, sealed windows. In a month, when the summer heat had really set in, it would be unbearable. Today it was merely airless and uncomfortable.

Deposited at the House of Detention, Matt opened up his white cane and went in to the sign-in desk.

He knew the officer on duty today. Brian Perham had been working at Rykers for almost twenty years. Matt knew that Brian had little use for most lawyers, certainly for most of the lawyers who went in and out of the prison. Matt Murdock went out of his way to be pleasant to the staff at Rykers—it didn't hurt, their jobs were hard enough, and sometimes it paid off in little ways.

"Holy Mother, Murdock, what happened to you?" From the sound of the officer's voice, Matt could practically read Perham's look of dismay from across the room. He'd forgotten again about the bruise on his face.

"Didn't watch where I was going, Brian. Ran into a wall. How's your family doing?" Again Matt dug out his wallet and handed the crucial IDs to Perham,

"Well, for the love a'—family's fine, thank you. But you ..." Perham pressed a pen for sign-in into Matt's hand and pushed the point down so it rested on the right line. The fact that Matt didn't need the help didn't faze him; an ordinary blind man would have, and Matt Murdock was presumed to be an ordinary blind man. "Hey, Murdock, you ever think of getting one of those dogs?"

"Seeing Eye dog? They're great, Perham, but I'm allergic to dogs. Maybe I should get a Seeing Eye cat?"

Perham guffawed. "In this city? Seeing Eye gorilla, maybe! Step to your left, now. You know the drill." With a nudge he guided Matt's hand toward the tray into which he was to empty his pockets. There'd been a guard once who'd thought it was funny to steal change from the blind man—until the blind man had pointedly asked for the money back. Perham wasn't like that. He talked Matt through the metal detector, and on the other side handed him back his pens, change, keys and wallet.

"Thanks, Perham. See you later."

“No problem, Murdock. Have a cheery day.” As Matt walked on down the corridor, Perham called after him, “And stay away from them walls!”

Matt waved back without turning.

Even without his heightened senses, Matt could have found his way to the interview rooms at Rykers in his sleep. He never bothered to count up the hours he’d spent in the prison (including the time a few months ago when he had been taken hostage during a riot engineered by Mr. Fear), but there’d been a lot of them. The stink of the place was familiar and appalling, and not at all masked by the disinfectants and cleansers the DOC threw at the problem. He never arrived at Rykers without counting the minutes until he could get out again.

At the next desk he showed his IDs again, and was taken into one of the big interview rooms and settled at a desk. It was early enough so that he was alone in the room, waiting for his client to be brought down for the meeting. He ran his fingertips over the casework Julie had forwarded to him. Sister Maggie’s friend Louis Bastuto: assault and trespass.

By the time Bastuto was brought in, there were three other visitors at three other desks in the room, all waiting for inmates to be brought to them. They could be caseworkers, investigators, lawyers, any one of the myriad specialists who worked within New York’s criminal law system. Matt did not recognize any of their voices.

“Murdock?” A guard’s stentorian voice called from the doorway. Matt raised a hand, and his client was brought to his desk.

Matt read Louis Bastuto as he had read his case file: quickly and thoroughly. Medium height, medium build, with a slight paunch, powerful arms, and thick fingers. What hair he had was combed back from a deep widow’s peak, and he wore glasses. His handshake was firm, his heartbeat

was steady, but there was the tang of nervous sweat about him.

"Please sit down. You're not that woman from Legal Aid I had yesterday; the Court sent you instead?" Bastuto's tone told Matt volumes: he was trying to be polite, in control in an uncontrollable situation. Louis Bastuto was out of his league, in trouble, worried, but he was trying to be civilized. Maggie was right. A decent man, Matt thought. How on Earth had he wound up at Rykers?

"Actually, a mutual friend asked me to help. Sister Maggie, from St. Bridget's. My name's Murdock, Mr. Bastuto." Matt offered him a business card. "From now on—if you want me as counsel—we're partners. If you need to get in touch with me, that's the number. Don't be afraid to call any time—if I can't take the call right then, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Let's get started, okay?" Matt moved to take one of the chairs. Bastuto stayed standing, looking at him.

"You're—" he started, then stopped.

Matt smiled. He'd had this conversation a million times with new clients. "Blind. Yeah. I hope that doesn't worry you, Mr. Bastuto."

"Louis," the man said. He sat down. "Well, I guess not." Matt heard his heartbeat skip a beat—Bastuto was lying, but tactfully. Then, more thoughtfully, his client said, "Sister Maggie trusts you, that counts for a lot, blind or no. And I guess you've been doing this a while, huh?"

"Years," Matt agreed. "As a matter of fact, I'm kinda good at it. My eyes don't work, but my brain does."

Now Bastuto grinned. "Well, of the two, I guess the brain's more important. I'm sorry, Mr. Murdock—"

"Matt."

"I'm sorry, Matt. This whole thing has got my head going in so many directions—it's not exactly where I thought I'd be spending my day, you know?" The man leaned one arm on the table and knuckled his forehead as if he were

driving away a headache. “My wife’s in shock, she doesn’t know what to tell the kids—”

Matt stopped him. “Tell you what. Let’s go over what happened, then we’ll figure out what’s the next step. All I’ve got here is the charge: that you were caught trespassing on the property of RenanTech Researches, assaulted one of the security people, and caused some property damage.”

Matt felt the change in heat as his client flushed with outrage. His voice was indignant.

“That’s a crock. I went to RenanTech to talk to someone —”

“Who?” Matt broke in.

Bastuto shook his head. “I don’t know his name. I didn’t know who to ask for, they just sent me in to talk to someone. Guy in a good suit, fancy office. Look, lemme explain why I was there, okay?”

“Okay. Tell me the story the way you want to tell it. I’ll save my questions for later.”

The stocky man sat back and took a deep breath. “Look, five years ago I lost my job. I’m an electrician, the contractor I was working for went bankrupt. That was the first thing. I was looking for a steady job when there was a fire in our building. We were burnt out, had nowhere to go, and we hadn’t been smart about saving money or anything. No relatives. Amy and I—Amy’s my wife—and the kids spent a couple of months more or less living out of our car.” Matt heard shame in the man’s voice; this was a guy who shelled out quarters to the homeless, not someone who could wind up homeless himself. “We couldn’t manage to get ahead, not with me doing odd jobs. And finding a job was hard when there was no phone people could call, no address to send stuff to. And the \$255 a week from Unemployment was just enough to keep us fed and decent, you know? Then someone told me about homesteading.”

Matt's eyebrows went up. "Homesteading?" The word conjured up visions of pioneers in sod shanties on the prairie.

Bastuto nodded. "That's what they call it."

A group of people had banded together and "homesteaded" a burnt-out tenement building on 10th Avenue and 52nd Street. Matt remembered the building, knew there had been ongoing repair work there. The homesteaders had made a deal with the city: if they lived in, repaired, and rehabilitated the building, they could take ownership.

"We got donations of the materials," Bastuto said, "and after awhile the building was in good enough shape to take out a mortgage to pay for the rest of the materials, and now ... it's really something." His voice was filled with pride, heartbeat even and steady. "Now, in the building next door, they're doing the same thing. Gets the city out of the landlord business, gets good people into good homes." The homesteaders had been delighted to have an electrician on board, and soon he'd had a "day job" as well as the work that was buying him and his family a home.

"It was a tough couple of years, working by day and coming home to wire apartments and stuff, but the kids are in a decent school, we have a good-sized apartment in a good building, with good neighbors. Everything's *good*." Bastuto gestured with his hands as if trying to grab another word to express the change in his fortunes.

"So how does RenanTech come into this?" Matt asked.

As he'd spoken of the homesteading co-op and his family, Bastuto had straightened in his chair, filled with pride. Now he slouched down again.

"RenanTech took over a warehouse on Twelfth—West Side Highway—about three years ago, filled it up with scientific equipment. *Didn't* hire a local electrician," he noted wryly. "No one really noticed them until the last year, something like that. They took over the building next door,

tore it down. Haven't built anything there yet. Trouble with a big, vacant lot like that, it attracts the wrong kind of people—drugs and gangs and stuff. We wanted to know what their plans were for the lot. It'd make a good community garden space, especially with Clinton Park just up in the next block."

"So you went to ask what they were doing with the lot?"

Bastuto shook his head. "By the time I went, there were other things. Rumors that RenanTech had *big* expansion plans, that they were planning to take over the whole block. Maybe more. I know the co-op's a couple of blocks away, but after all our work, it made people nervous. We had a meeting at the building, they decided I was the best one to go over there and talk to them."

"Why you?" Matt asked.

"They thought I'd be the most ... diplomatic," Bastuto laughed. "The head of the co-op is a great woman, a real powerhouse and a great organizer, but she has a temper that'd take paint off walls, if you push her. So they asked me to be point man."

He had called RenanTech and asked for a callback. No response. Called again. No response. Finally Louis Bastuto had gone there in person, parked himself in the lobby, and asked to speak to someone—Community Relations or Development or someone who was willing to discuss the use of their vacant lot for a community garden. Perhaps confirm or deny the persistent neighborhood rumors about expansion.

"Instead, they show me in to this guy from Security. Big guy in a real expensive suit, and there I am in jeans and a sports coat. Nothing like feeling outclassed, huh? Well, not only would the guy *not* talk about the garden or tell me anything useful, he picked a fight. Basically told me that RenanTech would do whatever they wanted to, and none of it would be any of my business. When I said that this was a neighborhood concern he told me there *was* no

neighborhood. I kept trying to keep my cool, let him get the yelling out of his system—and then he called a goon in a uniform to ‘escort me out.’ The goon grabbed me by the shoulder, tried to twist my arm behind me so he could force me to walk out, as if I’d been threatening someone ...

“Cripes, Mr. Murdock. Matt.” Bastuto’s voice was bewildered, angry. “I’d have gone if they hadn’t pulled the strong-arm stuff. But I—” He lowered his voice. “I lost it. I threw a punch. Totally outgunned, of course. They pinned me to the floor in no time, and suddenly there’s cops everywhere, and ...” He waved his hand miserably.

“And this,” Matt said.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have taken a swing at anyone if they hadn’t grabbed me first. And I wouldn’t have gotten into an argument if the big guy had listened to me and given me real answers, even if they were answers I didn’t like.” Bastuto stared miserably at the stained walls. His heart was still beating with a steady thud; his breathing was regular, perspiration only what you’d expect from an unhappy man on an early summer’s day in a small room inadequately cooled by a ceiling fan. By every marker Mart’s heightened senses could read, Louis Bastuto was telling the truth. He was upset, embarrassed, worried, a square-shooter who had never been in trouble with the law before.

So what was he doing in Rykers?

Time to be reassuring. “Look, Louis, from what you’ve said, it sounds like classic corporate overreaction. I’ll have to talk to the DA, but I think we should be able to get this dismissed. Frankly, I’m not sure why the police bothered to bring you in—”

“It’s not the police’s fault,” Bastuto protested. “That jerk in the suit told them I’d come in swinging, fought my way in. He told ‘em I’d brought a *baseball bat*, of all things! Like they’d have shown a guy with a baseball bat into the big cheese’s office, right? And I didn’t make things any better—

acted like an idiot and yelled that he was lying. So, who're they gonna believe—the two thousand dollar suit with the title and secretary, or me in my 1989 sports jacket, with dirt under my fingernails?”

“Were you armed when they arrested you?”

“I had a pocket knife—one of those Swiss Army jobs with eight thousand blades. My kids gave it to me last year for Father’s Day.”

Matt smiled. “Sounds pretty deadly to me. No baseball bat, right?”

Bastuto shook his head. “Nan. I think the big guy might’a had one in his office. He had a golf setup, and a soccer ball, and a bunch of other jock stuff around. I didn’t bring a baseball bat with me.”

“Okay,” Matt said. “You’re going to have to sit tight, Louis. It might take me a day or two to sort this out, but I’m *going* to sort it out. In the meantime, anything I can do? Anything you need?”

“Can you talk to my wife? She’s pretty freaked out.”

“Of course. Anything else?” Matt stood up.

Louis Bastuto smiled again. “Mr. Murdock, you get me out of here, that’s all I need. I can’t pay a fortune, but I—”

Matt shook his head. “It’s Matt, please. And don’t worry about the money; the court pays me. And even if it didn’t—I grew up in your neighborhood. Hell’s Kitchen. I’d just as soon we keep the good citizens on the outside.”

“Hell’s Kitchen? Where?” Bastuto’s voice was filled with a warmth Matt could feel across the table. For a few minutes they simply stood, gossiping, comparing neighborhood notes, until the guard at the door gave an exasperated cough.

“That’s my subtle cue to go.” Matt held out his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll get this wrapped up as fast as I can.”

He had two other clients to see: a big-bankroll two-time loser who didn’t look to get any luckier this time around; and Chris Gomez, a first-time kid whose friends had left

him in the car while they tried to rob a White Castle. Fortunately, both men were in the House of Detention, which cut the red tape down to annoying from purely impossible. Matt was late getting out of his interviews, and found Steve Zdinak waiting for him at the parking lot when he got off the DOC bus. Back in the car, reversing the process of IDs and searches in order to leave the island, he was conscious of the relief he always felt. Couldn't wait to get gone.

In the car back to Manhattan, Matt pulled out his cell phone and made a couple of calls. The first was to Directory Assistance for the number of RenanTech. Then one to the offices of Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock, to check in with Julie Haupt, his secretary: get messages, and pass along the word that he had a late appointment in Manhattan and wouldn't show up at the office today. That done, he dialed the number of Melissa Chin, the ADA on Bastuto's case. He knew her slightly—they'd worked opposite sides of the table a couple of times—and thought that probably they'd be able to work something out. He wanted Louis Bastuto cleared of the charges, and it didn't sound like a tough job.

"ADA Chin." The voice on the other end of the line was high-pitched, girlish, and could fool you into believing you were dealing with a callow kid just out of law school. The reality was that Melissa Chin was on her second career, a tall, stately Asian woman with a serene manner and an appetite for detail.

"Melissa? It's Matt Murdock."

"My lucky day. Hello, counselor. What's up?"

"Louis Bastuto."

He heard her shuffle through a stack of files on her desk. "Bastuto, Bastuto, Bastuto—ah! The bat-boy. How does he rate your personal attention?"

"*Pro bono*. Referred by an old friend." *Bat-boy*? Matt thought. That didn't sound promising.

Chin laughed. "Rosalind Sharpe *lets* you do pro *bono* work?"

Matt winced. His senior partner's overbearing manner was not exactly a secret in New York judicial circles, but even so ... "I'm over the age of consent, Melissa."

"Has that ever slowed Rosalind down? So. Your client stormed an office in midtown, laid about him with a baseball bat, was subdued by security, and delivered tied up in pink ribbon to the police. You want to plead it out?"

"Nah. You want to drop the charges?"

Chin laughed again. "Any reason why I should?"

"Doesn't it seem a little too tidy? The pink ribbons and all?"

"I'm a prosecutor in New York City, Murdock. Someone hands me a neat case, I say, 'Thank you' and go on to the next mess."

Matt put on his most conciliatory tone. "I've met this guy, Melissa. He's a straight shooter; he says he didn't do it, and I believe him. Claims that the exec misrepresented the matter to the arresting officers. And has anyone suggested a reason why he would have attacked someone at RenanTech?"

"I don't have to provide motive. You know that. I've got a baseball bat, a whole mess of smashed up executive suite furniture, and three witnesses: the exec and two security guards."

"What about the secretary?"

There was exasperation in Chin's tone now. "What secretary?"

"There must have been a receptionist or a secretary or someone who let him through to see the exec. Did he *enter the building* with a baseball bat?"

"You're saying it was planted?" There was a pause at the other end. "No notation that the secretary was interviewed. I'll ask someone. But look, Matt, you're normally pretty

astute. I don't see why you're falling for the *I was framed* line from this guy."

He couldn't tell her that he'd used his own personal "lie detector" on Bastuto. "You'd have to meet him, Melissa."

"I will. Look, I'll see what kind of plea I can offer. And I'll ask about the secretary. But that's it. If you want to play Perry Mason—well, you've done it before, but usually with bigger fish. This sounds to me like a local boy gone berserk. This city'll do it to 'em from time to time."

"Not this one. I'll be in touch, Melissa. Thanks for the help."

He cut off the call and sat back. From her perspective, Chin was right: there was no reason why the RenanTech people should set up a visitor to their offices on assault and trespass charges. But he was certain that Bastuto was on the level.

A niggling thought occurred to him: his hypersenses had played him false last night. What if he wasn't reading Bastuto right, now?

He dismissed the thought as his cell phone *chrrrped*.

"Murdock."

"*Matthew*." One word infused with the kind of punitive menace that only the hun in charge of discipline in junior high could have matched. The alto drawl belonged to his partner, Rosalind Sharpe; she did not sound amused.

He tried to keep resignation out of his voice. The best thing about the office being painted had been Rosalind working from home—armed with her laptop, fax, copier, call forwarding, and law clerks ferrying papers and law books back and forth between the office and her apartment. Rosalind was a brilliant lawyer, a rainmaker who'd brought high-paying clients to the firm; she was also a control freak, a snob, and a champion manipulator. Dealing with Rosalind was hard enough for Matt; for Foggy Nelson, Matt's best friend and the third partner in the firm, it was nearly impossible—Rosalind Sharpe was his mother,

a fact she did not hesitate to use to her own best advantage.

"Hello, Rosalind. How're things?"

"Things are fine here, Matthew. And with you?" Too polite. Bad sign.

"Very good. Getting lots done. Very busy."

"So your secretary said. Off at Ryker's Island all morning talking to clients. Laudable."

"Why, thank you."

"Laudable if the clients are *billable*, Matthew." *Here it comes*, he thought.

"Two billable, one *pro bono*."

"Umm hmm. And how much time did you spend with the paying clients?"

Does she have spies everywhere? Matt wondered. *How would she know I spent most of the morning with Bastuto?* "I had an initial consult with the *pro bono* client, and half-hour meetings with the other two."

Matt imagined her rolling her eyes. "And what exactly has Mr. *Pro bono* done, Matthew? How much is this going to cost the firm? How many *billable* hours are you going to waste taking care of one poor chickadee who could have been neatly handled by the Public Defender's Office?"

"An old and very important friend asked me to take the case, Rosalind. And if you recall," Matt reminded her evenly, "the deal, when we set up the office, was that I was going to do some *pro bono* work. Not negotiable. This is what I got into law to do: defend regular people who need help." *Guys like the ones I grew up with. Like Louis Bastuto.* He didn't say it aloud.

"That's *sooooo* sweet." There was no subtlety to her sarcasm at all. "The case offers us nothing: long hours, no glory, no money. Plead it out and get back to real work."

He could hear the brush of her thumb on the buttons as she moved to cut the call off at her end. "Rosalind!" he barked sharply.

"Yes, Matthew." Long suffering voice.

"I'm not pleading the case. The guy didn't do it—"

She didn't even bother to answer, just sighed gustily.

"But I *am* going to contact RenanTech and see if I can get them to drop the charges. It's a weird case—I'll tell you about it some time. I don't think it should go to court."

"Can you persuade the DA's office of this?" she asked sweetly.

"I will. But I'm not going to sell Louis Bastuto out for the sake of our bottom line."

"Just remember." Her voice changed again, this time to the frostiest of cool tones. "You are a partner. You have a fiduciary responsibility to the firm. That means you have a responsibility to that bottom line you think so little of. Plead the case, settle the case, get the case gone and do some real work."

This time she cut the connection. *Just as well*, he thought. Rosalind made it a policy not to be swayed by what her junior partners thought or wanted—at least until she could pass it off as her own brilliant idea.

Matt wanted a cup of coffee and a sandwich, but his next appointment was in Soho, and by the time Steve dropped him on Spring Street there'd be no time to eat. He returned the cell phone to his pocket, settled against the seat, and began to consider what reason the people at RenanTech could have for setting up Louis Bastuto.



CHAPTER THREE

After all the time, energy, and money she had lavished on her office at Quayle-Partido, Belinda Quayle regretted that she spent so little time there.

When Arthur Partido died, she'd had to wait a couple of tactful weeks before she could toss out the old man's gloomy velvet drapes and leather stuff and open it up to a squad of decorators, but it had been worth the wait. Now the walls were covered in a pale-yellow silk that made the large room seem enormous; light gauze curtains cut the glare from the southern sun, but let her get the best of the extraordinary view of Battery Park, the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island. The massive old furniture and leather chairs had been replaced with delicate Regency pieces; she'd even had a feng shui consultant review the placement of the furniture to ensure maximum serenity and prosperity. The only thing that hadn't changed was the bank of electronic gear that fed her a constant stream of market data. The office said all the things she needed said: that the person who worked here was smart, stylish, and powerful.

Belinda looked down at the old Customs Building, sixteen stories below, and at the people milling in the street. Ants. It wasn't an original thought, but it struck Belinda with renewed force. They really were ants, and hers was the boot that could either crush or spare them.

The intercom chirruped. "Miss Belinda? Mr. Quayle is ready to see you now."

Belinda nodded to herself and looked over at the shrouded table by the door. She buzzed back. "Susie? Have a couple of associates come in and roll this table in to Mr. Quayle's office, please." She did not wait to hear her secretary's response, but started across the office to her grandfather's suite.

As always, Belinda was aware of the sideways glances, the little ripple of nervousness that went through the securities and trading areas as she walked past. She knew

which men liked her looks—most of them—and which were intimidated by her. Most of them. She knew which women admired her and which feared her. As much as Belinda loved her office, she loved walking across the open work floor better: by the time she reached her grandfather's office she was energized, standing tall and confident in the anxious sight of her subordinates.

She breezed past Bernard Quayle's secretary with a nod, stepped into her grandfather's office, and waited until the table, on its noiseless casters, had been rolled in behind her. Then she nodded to the two trading associates who'd brought the table in for her, and pointedly looked to the door. She closed the door behind them.

"Good morning, Grandfather." Bernard Quayle was standing. She crossed the room to place a cool kiss on his cheek.

"Good morning, Belinda."

For a long moment each one waited for the other. They'd done that always, as long as Belinda could remember, from the day when her parents had died in an airline crash and her grandfather had come to Belinda's school to take her home and tell her that she would live with him from now on. There had been no tears on either side, no screams or questions: Bernard Quayle had delivered the devastating news to his six-year-old granddaughter, and she had taken it in, white-faced and watchful, without a word. He had looked much the same then as he did now: tall, exquisitely tailored, fine boned and gentle-looking; these days he was a little thinner, his hair immaculately silver, and the skin over his high cheekbones laced with tiny blood vessels that gave him a flushed, healthy look. He looked like an English gentleman, an Oxford scholar, Mr. Chips in a \$2000 suit.

But people on Wall Street knew that Bernard Quayle's patrician looks belied his aggressive, cold-blooded approach to the market economy and his willingness to skate ethical lines between possibility and legality. His

reprimands were legendary: delivered in a quiet, conversational voice, they could blister paint. If people on the floor at Quayle-Partido watched Belinda Quayle apprehensively when she walked past, they actively feared Bernard Quayle.

Except for Belinda. "I brought the model." She gestured at the table with its canvas cover. "It's really lovely. I think you'll like it."

Bernard smiled and sat. "It should be lovely, for the amount of money it cost us."

"It's good. Classy, luxurious, exclusive—and if we decide we want to keep a piece of the retail, we can put design cues in place that will discourage people from shopping outside the development."

"And how do you do that?" Quayle smiled slightly as he regarded his granddaughter. She didn't entirely like the smile, which had a slight edge of patronizing indulgence to it, but she smiled back. That was the way the game was played.

"You put the lobby doors on the apartment buildings so they face the river—people think it's for the view, right?—but really, it's so they face toward the shopping plaza and away from any other retail outlets in the neighborhood. Not that there are any worth the name in the neighborhood."

"Not now," Quayle agreed. "But once West Haven Place is built, other retail outlets will open in the neighborhood. All right, that's a good thought. Let's see what we have."

Belinda reached over and removed the model cover with a flourish that almost demolished part of a carefully crafted balsa wood wall. She put the wall back together with a touch of a manicured finger, then gestured at the whole model. "Voila. Our own little city."

And so it seemed. The planned West Haven Place development spread over an area roughly four blocks by three, fronting on the Hudson River and eating up a good deal of Hell's Kitchen real estate. The architects had

carefully detailed the gardened overpass which would hide the noise and pollution of the West Side Highway from the eyes and noses of West Haven residents; the two office towers; and the shopping and entertainment complex that would supply West Haven with everything needed. The model maker had even roughed in the neighboring streets: the development was to extend from the river at 53rd Street, across to 9th Avenue, skirting St. Clare's hospital on 9th, and as far down as 49th Street—which looked even shabbier by comparison with the pink granite and bronze splendor of West Haven.

"Our jewel doesn't have the best setting in the world," Bernard Quayle said critically.

Belinda frowned. "When we first discussed the project, you didn't want the development to go too large. I agree about the neighborhood, but I can't change what surrounds West Haven without buying it up and tearing it down. Not that that wouldn't be an improvement. If you want to change the parameters of the assignment ..." she hinted unobtrusively. In fact, Belinda had been looking for a way to enlarge the scope of West Haven.

"It's likely that West Haven will bring some change to the neighborhood anyway." Bernard smiled but did not rise to his granddaughter's bait. "We can worry about that later. My immediate concern is for the property we want to build on. What progress have you made?"

"Aside from the property we already own on 12th Avenue, we've bought up disparate parcels—three tenements on 53rd and 10th, the warehouse on 54th and a light industrial complex on 11th, a few commercial spaces. We own about a third of the property we're going to need, with negotiations ongoing for most of the rest." The moment the word "most" left her lips, Belinda knew it was a mistake.

"Most?" Bernard pounced on the word like a Siamese on a spool of thread.

"There are some buildings we don't want to bid for yet. For strategic reasons."

The old man nodded sagely, and asked in tones so polite that the menace behind them was almost imperceptible, "Those reasons are?"

"Rent control regulations and owner sentimentality." Belinda's lip curled. "We can buy most of the properties, but getting the tenants out is going to be difficult because of tenant-favorable laws. I've got our lobbyists in Albany working ... but we may need more aggressive tactics here. We have that in hand."

"And the owner sentimentality you mentioned?"

"A couple of tenant-owned buildings are unlikely to go quietly. But we're working on a program to render the current environment unappealing to the people who are living there now. The same tactics I mentioned yesterday, to deal with the rent control hold-outs."

Bernard stroked his lower lip with one finger, a theatrical gesture that should have looked affected, but somehow didn't. He stared thoughtfully at the model. "Don't render the neighborhood too unappealing, or you'll hamper our ability to sell West Haven when the time comes."

"We're taking care of it, Grandfather," Belinda said, a little more insistently this time. "The perceived threat will be blamed on the current resident base, and will be removed before we start sales on West Haven."

The old man walked around the model, examining the paths, the landscaping, the glossy look of the office towers and the four residential blocks. "Do we really need three playgrounds?" he asked.

"Research says yes. They're a strong draw for the high-income family market. And over time they're far cheaper than landscape maintenance."

"I'm sure you're right. What about noise from the hospital?" He pointed a long finger at the model

representing St. Clare's hospital.

"That wall on the east side of West Haven is an acoustic shield. Reduces noise by 85 percent."

Bernard nodded thoughtfully, gave a last appraising look at the model, then returned to his desk. "I presume that when you say 'we are taking care of it,' you mean you and —"

"And David, yes. Is that a problem?" Belinda tilted her head inquisitively; her eyes were cold.

"A problem? My dear, I trust you implicitly. I would simply prefer that David's enthusiasm not get the better of him. I did hear the news this morning."

Belinda tilted her head again. "The news, sir?"

Bernard sighed. "Belinda, my dear girl, I may be old, but I am not stupid. Frankly, I don't care if you kill off a few of the locals to drive the rest off, but don't taint the neighborhood. Are we clear on this?"

"Yes, Grandfather." Belinda smiled; she'd made the old man show his hand. Points for her.

"Very well, my dear. A nice job, over all. But keep your boyfriend under control, please. I'm sure he's a worthy young man, and will be very useful to us..."

Belinda walked around behind the desk and put her arms around her grandfather's shoulders. She rubbed her cheek against the old man's affectionately. "I have David under control, Grandfather. Everything is going according to plan."

He reached one long-fingered hand up to stroke her hair. "Just see that it keeps on that way, my dear."

Matt's meeting in Soho dragged on forever. During a break, he put in another call to RenanTech, and again was told that someone would get back to him.

"Wait a minute!" he yelled into the phone. He heard fumbling noises on the other end as the RenanTech

receptionist stopped from hanging up just in time. "What?" She sounded startled, even apprehensive.

Matt made his voice very polite. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I really do need to speak to your head of Security, Mr.—" he paused for her to fill in the blank. She didn't. "What *is* the name of the head of security."

"Oh!" She sounded relieved to have a question she could actually answer. "Wachtel. Mr. Wachtel is our head of security, sir." She was still nervous: Matt could hear her rapid heartbeat and the tremulousness in her tone. She clearly was not finding RenanTech a fun place to work.

"Okay." He spoke slowly, so as not to spook her. "Would you please tell Mr. Wachtel that I need to speak to him by the close of business today? I'll give you my office number and my cellphone number *again*. It's important I speak to him."

"I understand, sir." Offended dignity at the other end of the phone. From her broad accent, a Queens girl, touchy about being brighter than she sounded. "I'll give Mr. Wachtel the message."

Matt hung up and his meeting swallowed him whole again.

At 4:30, when he checked in with his office, there was still no word from Wachtel or RenanTech. Matt sighed and called one more time.

"Oh, hello!" This time the RenanTech receptionist sounded like he was an old friend this time. "I'll try Mr. Wachtel, Mr. Murdock."

Matt heard the click of the transfer, and was prepared for a moment's hum and the receptionist offering to take a message.

Instead, a man's voice came on, low and resonant. "Wachtel."

"Mr. Wachtel, my name is Matt Murdock. I'm defendant's counsel in the State's case against Louis Bastuto, and I was hoping to meet with you—"

"Why?" Wachtel's bass voice was bored.

"I'd like to hear your take on what happened."

"Simple. Bastuto broke in, came at me with a baseball bat, the cops took him away. End of story. If you'll excuse—" Arrogance and boredom, this time.

"My client's version of the story is somewhat different, Mr. Wachtel. I was hoping—"

Wachtel broke in again. "Your *client* is another neighborhood thug trying to intimidate a growing business. Some people can't stand it when other people succeed. We have nothing to discuss, Mr. Murtaugh."

"Murdock." Was he imagining things, or was this guy taking a paranoid *all-about-me* approach to this subject? "I think we do have something to discuss. Why would Mr. Bastuto break into RenanTech's offices and attack you, personally, with a baseball bat?"

There was a pause. For a moment Matt thought he might have gotten the other man's attention. Then his hypersensitive ears picked up the faint tap of a golf club hitting a ball, and the hushed sound of the ball rolling over carpet, the click as it rolled into a plastic cup.

He's playing golf! Matt thought, furious. *Who put this guy in a position where he can talk to the public?*

"Mr. Wachtel," Matt insisted. "I would like to meet with you tomorrow. I'm sure we can come up with a solution—"

"Here's your solution, Murphy. Your client goes to jail, and the other thugs in the neighborhood realize that we're not a target."

Matt was getting very tired of being interrupted. "A target for what?" The guy was not making sense. Matt understood now how Louis Bastuto's effort to talk "diplomatically" to someone at RenanTech had become a disaster.

"A target for them or their two-bit mouthpieces. Do you have any idea what this neighborhood is like, Murphy?"

We're trying to run a business, improve the neighborhood, and psychotics like your *client* want to tear that down."

There was a long silence.

"Well," Matt said at last. "I take it that asking you to drop the charges against Mr. Bastuto as a goodwill gesture to the neighborhood isn't going to get me anywhere."

Wachtel laughed. There was a manic adrenaline edge to the laughter, as if he and Matt were engaged in some sort of contest and Wachtel had just seen the scores. "Go away, Murphy. You're interrupting my golf game."

The phone went dead.

Matt sat for a few minutes, letting his temper cool, trying to figure out what had just happened. In all his years as a lawyer and a costumed vigilante, he had dealt with lots of nuts: psychotic serial killers, megalomaniacal terrorists, fear-crazed victims, and the purely low, nasty scum who crawled through New York's underworld. He did not recall ever having had a conversation like this one. He felt distinctly as though he'd just spent ten minutes on the other side of the looking-glass.

He called the office, left a message for his partner, Foggy Nelson. Then he called the *Daily Bugle*, where by a stroke of good fortune he found Ben Urich at his desk. Even this late in the afternoon, Urich was likely to be out of the office, talking to people, doing legwork, piecing the scraps of a story into a convincing whole. He was old fashioned enough to enjoy doing the legwork; besides, as he had once told Matt, staying out of the office kept him out of the neighborhood of the *Bugle's* high-volume, high-tempered publisher, J. Jonah Jameson.

It was maybe inaccurate to call Matt and Urich friends. In a sense, they were co-workers, colleagues, each involved in unearthing the city's truths and seeing that evil was punished. Ben Urich used words to strip away lies and conspiracy, to protect the innocent and the weak. Matt

Murdock used his wits, and his fists, to accomplish the same thing.

Ben Urich was one of only a bare handful of people who knew that Matt Murdock and Daredevil were the same. It might have been his biggest story, but Urich was smarter than that; he admired Matt Murdock the lawyer, and Matt Murdock the costumed hero. The working relationship the two men had arrived at was based on trust—and mutual benefit, to be sure. Urich got stories; Murdock got information. But it was also a relationship based on trust, and a desire to help those who couldn't help themselves.

"So. What's up?" Urich's gravelly voice buzzed with curiosity.

"I need a little help, Ben."

"Oh?" In the syllable, Matt heard unspoken questions. "Would this be something your hornheaded buddy would have an interest in?"

"Could be. Have you ever heard anything about a company called RenanTech? Located Midtown, west side."

"Hell's Kitchen?" Ben was clearly intrigued now. "Don't know the name. Should I?"

"Maybe." Matt outlined Louis Bastuto's case—and the weird call he had with Wachtel. "Tell me there's not *something* going on there, Ben."

Urich snorted. "Not me, I'm naturally suspicious. So you want background on RenanTech?"

"And anything you can scrape up on David Wachtel. The guy's too weird not to have left a trail somewhere."

Matt heard the scrape of pen on paper as Urich transcribed the names. "I'll get on it. Anything I find out, you get. And anything you find—"

"You have as an exclusive," Matt promised.

He hung up, called Karen, and set up dinner at Shun Fei for 7:30. Then he called the office again.

There were drop cloths all over the place, and it was driving Franklin Nelson crazy. He couldn't tell, until he lifted a cloth up and looked, which was his computer and which was the stack of Law Records he hadn't returned to the library. Masked by the tarpaulins, the phone was the same-sized lump as his Day-Runner. The legal pads on which he made methodical, intricate notes were scattered all over the office, wherever he was able to sit down for five minutes. It was a nightmare. Not that he hadn't been in favor of painting the office when the landlord offered—it needed it. But the painters seemed to work on a system whereby they painted one wall, went home for the day, then came back and painted a wall in another room. They'd been prepping and painting now for six days, and finished painting in only one room. His desk was always elbow-deep in paper, but he couldn't see any of it, had to go rummaging around forever to find what he needed, always with the painters standing around looking at him like it was all his fault they weren't done by now.

Foggy stood in the doorway to his office, staring at the chaos hopelessly. He was a big, heavysset man with an unlawyerly shock of tousled brown hair and a fondness for vests. Depending on his frame of mind and his diet, his face sometimes looked a little doughy, but his eyes were intelligent, he was a clever and methodical lawyer, and he had, as his co-workers and his best friend knew, a generous, empathetic heart. Which was why it was hard for him to resent Matt staying out of the office.

He knew how awful the painting was for Matt: the fumes drove him crazy, and he had to expend huge amounts of energy “seeing through” the smell with his hypersenses. Foggy Nelson knew Matt's secret life, and he'd helped Matt cover up his abilities many times. When Matt told everyone he was allergic to paint fumes, Foggy had urged him to keep himself clear of the office and the clutter as much as possible. Rosalind Sharpe, Foggy's senior partner, had

grumbled about that until she decided it was a good idea for her, too. She had announced that during the painting she would be working from home with her laptop, a telnet into the Lexis legal database, and her own espresso machine. She wasn't interested in working amid chaos and a grumpy staff.

All this left only Foggy to mind the fort. With the best will in the world, and trying hard not to feel abandoned, Foggy wound up working by the coffee machine in the office kitchen. Eating doughnuts. Sabotaging his diet.

He sighed.

"Mr. Nelson?" Rebecca, his secretary, leaned around the doorsill into the room.

"Rebecca, Rosalind isn't in the office. Would you please call me Foggy like everyone else?" Neither he nor Matt cared much for office formality, but predictably their senior partner was a staunch believer. Foggy knew his mother had done a lot for the firm, but she'd also taken a nice little firm where they represented the people they believed in, and made it ... corporate. If he'd wanted to be corporate, he could have gone to work for Name, Name, Name and Name Jr., when he was fresh out of law school.

Rebecca was saying something. "I'm sorry?" Foggy prompted.

"I was wondering if it was really any better in the lunch room than at your desk," she said. "Oh, and Mr. Murdock's on the phone for you. Line six."

Rebecca retreated down the hallway, and Foggy reached for the phone.

"Hey, Counselor," Matt's strong tones—touched with just a hint of Hell's Kitchen Irish—were like a slap on the back. Foggy sat a little straighter and grinned at the phone.

"Hey, yourself, Matt. How's it going?"

"Just finished the Ramnanan meeting; it ran longer than I'd hoped, but the case is fairly routine. But I need you to do a little digging."

"We have clerks to do digging—" Foggy began. Between Rosalind's natural imperiousness and Matt's other life as Daredevil, he sometimes felt like the errand boy. Lately, what with the painting and all, he'd been thinking he had to take a stand about it—at least with Matt.

"Hey, if you don't have the time—it's just that this is such a weird case. I kind of wanted the Franklin Nelson investigative touch." Matt began to tell Foggy about his meeting with Louis Bastuto that morning, and his conversation with David Wachtel. Somewhere in the middle of the story Foggy realized he was making notes on the back of a Xeroxed brief. Matt had hooked him again.

"So you want to know about RenanTech and this Wachtel guy?"

"Anything you can get. Ben Urich is checking out any criminal charges, and he was going to talk to one of the *Bugle's* financial writers, too. Look, I'm serious: if you have other stuff to do, I'll bother one of the clerks. I just thought this might be more fun than that brief you were writing."

Foggy looked at the paper-strewn table before him. "Tooth extraction would be more fun than the brief I'm writing," he agreed. "Okay, hotshot, I'll take a stroll across the 'Net and see what turns up."

"Thanks. Aside from that—how are things going there? Does it look like they're going to be done with the painting anytime soon? I don't like to leave you holding the bag, partner, but—"

"Hey, I know what the fumes do to you," Foggy said. One of the things about his long friendship with Matt Murdock: Matt always appreciated what you did for him, whether it was finding case citations or creating a diversion so that Daredevil could make an appearance. "The painters must be doing a brilliant job, because they're certainly taking their time. Only one office is fully painted."

Matt groaned on the other end of the line. "Don't tell me. Rosalind's."

“Of course. I don’t know how she does it. And she still says she’s not coming in until the whole office is done. The chaos is too *distracting*.” He managed a dead-on impersonation of their senior partner.

“Hang tough, partner. The painting can’t go on forever.”

Foggy looked down the hall, where one of the painters was lounging against the wall—presumably unpainted—with a can of soda in one hand, trying to flirt with an intern. The huge sense of ill-use he’d been struggling with all day resurfaced.

“The painting can’t last forever,” he agreed mournfully. “It’ll only seem that way. The paint fumes are probably eating my brain cells as we speak. I can’t smell anything, my food tastes funny ...” He put a hand on his substantial paunch and shook his head. “I’m wasting away to a shadow of my former self, Matthew.”

The bid for sympathy didn’t work. Matt laughed. “I owe you one, Foggy. When the painting’s done and you can smell again, dinner’s on me.”

“Okay. Deal. See ya.” Foggy hung up, looked for a moment at the bound law records and folders on the table, then pushed them aside and lifted the tarpaulin that shrouded his PC.

Matt met Karen at 7:30 that evening at Shun Fei, a stylish Chinese restaurant on the Upper West Side. Over crispy duck and poached sea bass, Matt told Karen about Louis Bastuto, and about his call to RenanTech that afternoon.

“Two-bit mouthpieces!” Karen squeaked. “He actually said that? Who writes his dialogue?”

“At least he didn’t call me shyster. I *hate* that.” Matt took another bite of duck.

“So this Wachtel deals with his problem by insulting you? Why not just wave a big, huge red flag that says *something suspicious here*?”

“That’s a good question. The other question I’d love to have answered is why Wachtel is so down on a decent guy like Louis Bastuto.”

“And you’re sure Bastuto’s on the level?”

That was one thing Matt was ready to swear to. His senses had picked up none of the physical markers for lying; either Louis Bastuto was telling the truth, or he was a stone-cold psychotic. And Matt didn’t believe that either. He began to tell Karen Bastuto’s whole story—the fire, his family’s brief homelessness, how they’d hooked up with the homesteading co-op.

It was the homesteading that captured Karen’s imagination. “What a brilliant idea! Combats homelessness and urban blight with one action. God, that’s a story I could do on the show!” Karen didn’t often have guests or do theme-nights on her call-in radio show, but every now and then, something caught her imagination ... which this clearly had. Big time. “Can you put me in touch with his wife? Or the head of the co-op?”

“I suppose so. All I know about them, really, is that Louis was sent to talk to RenanTech because he was the diplomatic one,” Matt said.

“Diplomacy is great for negotiation, but it makes lousy radio, Matt. Just put me together with Bastuto’s family, his neighbors, and I’ll build up a whole city’s worth of support for your client.”

Matt agreed to get a name and number for the head of Louis Bastuto’s co-op. “But do me a favor and don’t go after RenanTech just yet, Karen. I’ve got a call in to see if I can meet the CEO tomorrow. I don’t want anything—even your lovely self—compromising my ability to work something out in Louis’ behalf. Okay?”

Karen opened her fortune cookie. “I will be the soul of discretion,” she intoned.

“Is that what it says?” Matt asked suspiciously.

Karen smiled. "Nah. But I had you going for a minute, didn't I?"

They paid the bill and started a leisurely walk homeward. Karen kept her arm tucked through Matt's, as if she were guiding him down the street. It allowed him to fold up his white cane and saunter down along without someone offering to help him across the avenue. The night was balmy, and the sidewalk cafes were full. It was noisy and crowded on Broadway, but Matt was enjoying the stroll.

Then his attention was caught by a thread of words. A kid on roller blades zipped past them on the right. Matt caught a snatch of sound from the newscast the kid was listening to on his Walkman: "*—reports the Cutter has been sighted again in Hell's Kitchen have been confirmed—*" he heard.

"I've got to get downtown," he whispered to Karen. She didn't ask questions, but took an immediate left onto a side street, knowing it would be easier for him to find a place to change from Matt Murdock to Daredevil here.

"Go!" she whispered. "Be careful."

A moment later, Karen Page was back, strolling down Broadway. When she heard a cry from a teenager who'd caught a fleeting glimpse of a man in red moving with incredible speed across the rooftops, she did not look up, but she grinned.



CHAPTER FOUR

Daredevil hitched a ride on a yellow cab for fifteen blocks, then, when an ambulance went careening by, crouched low on the roof of the cab, launched off it with a powerful leap, and somersaulted right onto the back of the ambulance. He was careful to make it a soft landing; he didn't want to jostle any attendants and passengers inside. The ambulance screamed down 9th Avenue with the red-suited vigilante lying flat on top of it. At 53rd Street, Daredevil rolled off the ambulance, landed in a crouch, and cast out a line from his billy club that would swing him up to the rooftops. There, he took off running toward the commotion he had already pinpointed two blocks west.

He was too late.

Coming on the scene from the roof of a building on 11th Avenue and 53rd Street, Daredevil sensed a cluster of police cars, uniformed cops already pushing back a crowd of gawkers. The ambulance he'd just abandoned came howling up 52nd and turned onto 11th Avenue, nosing in between the police cars. For a moment the crowd thinned and, by focusing his hypersenses, Daredevil could make out what had happened below.

There was a body lying in the street. The coppery tang of blood—lots of blood—wafted up to assault Daredevil's heightened sense of smell. Fragments of slick magazine paper fluttered and skirled around the crime site in the summer breeze and, halfway down the block, the ruins of a wood-and-aluminum newsstand creaked unsteadily. Daredevil swore under his breath.

He knew the stand. Knew the guy who ran it, an old-timer who'd been there since Matt Murdock was a kid. Hassan Denges, tall, thin and endlessly optimistic, had been one of the neighborhood characters. Gang wars and petty criminals had left Denges untouched; even the Kingpin's soldiers had given the old man a free pass in those times when the neighborhood had been a war zone. He had that many friends, that many people beholden to

him. Denges had believed that it *did* take a village to raise kids, and did his part, talking and listening endlessly to them, telling some of them the home truths they couldn't hear from their own parents, about staying in school and staying out of gangs and away from dope. The kind of guy who'd call a mother to let her know where her kids were, as the evening went on. By attacking Denges, the Cutter had cut away a piece of the neighborhood. More than that, he'd taken a swipe at Daredevil himself, although he couldn't have known it. Because Denges, blind from birth in one eye, had been one of the people who'd expected a little more from young Matthew Murdock after his accident, who let him know that blindness wasn't the end of the world.

And now he was dead.

As Daredevil watched, a uniform from the Midtown South Precinct ushered a couple of Crime Scene specialists and the coroner to the body. Denges lay face down, one arm stretched out as if he were reaching for help. Daredevil was pretty sure the body's position was accidental, but the thought of Hassan Denges staggering down the sidewalk, losing blood, terrified of his attacker, left the hero in a state of icy rage.

From his vantage point seven stories up, he listened to the police talk.

"If you guys are done with your photos, we'll get this poor guy off the street," he heard the coroner say. "Geez, what a way to die. They know who sliced him up?"

"Witnesses say it was a big guy, all in black, with a really big, black knife."

The Cutter. Daredevil wanted to move in closer, try to pick up a trail—but getting into a territorial discussion with the police over his right to inspect a crime scene would only slow him down.

"Whatever made those cuts, it was big, and the guy swinging it was strong as hell," said the coroner.

Another voice chimed in. "That your *professional* opinion, Gruschek?" Daredevil knew the speaker slightly: Vance Hawkins, a detective from Midtown South.

"As a matter of fact, yes," replied the coroner. He was busily unpacking his site gear, the body bag and tags. The crime scene team was photographing the area; Daredevil could hear the muffled pop of the flashes.

"Looks like you hit the jackpot. Witness says it was a large Bowie knife."

"So whaddid he have against our Mr.—" the coroner stopped to check the name he'd written on the toe-tag. "Mr. Denges?"

That's the real question, Daredevil thought. *Any witnesses got a theory on that one?* He decided to swing down closer, perhaps ask a few questions of his own.

"The witness says our perp just came in swinging," said Hawkins. "No argument, no yelling, nothing seemed to cause it. Which does make it sound like the perp had it in for Mr. Denges. Or like it might be some sort of old-time turf war, like the bad old days when the Kingpin ran things. But Fisk ... this isn't even remotely his style. Anyway, if it's the same guy who did last night's slashing at the Clinton Plaza ... that was obviously an opportunistic attack."

"Can you be sure tonight's attack wasn't opportunistic too, Sergeant?"

Hawkins looked up. Daredevil was crouched on a second-story fire escape, clear of the crime scene but close enough to chat.

"Cripes, come down if you want to talk. I don't need a stiff neck." Daredevil executed a neat somersault and landed three feet from the detective. "You don't think the Cutter targeted the newspaper seller?"

Daredevil scanned the area around him; no scent, no residual trail. Nothing to follow. "This guy doesn't need provocation to attack, Detective. But he also didn't strike me as being on some kind of vendetta—"

“And Denges is the last guy you’d think anyone’d have it in for,” Hawkins finished.

Daredevil nodded. “The Cutter may simply have seen Mr. Denges closing up and decided to go for him. This guy seems to like going after people who can’t fight back—the girl last night, Denges tonight.”

“You knew Denges?” Hawkins asked casually.

“This is *my* neighborhood, detective.”

The cop sighed. “*Your* neighborhood. Right. Okay, you went up against this guy last night. You have any read on him? Could he be an enforcer for someone?”

The name Wilson Fisk—the Kingpin, Daredevil’s longtime nemesis—was not spoken, but the implication was there. Fisk, though, would never have been behind such attacks—as Hawkins had said, they were beneath even him. No, the Cutter must be acting for someone else, but who?

“I think maybe I need to do a little research, Detective. I can’t think of anyone offhand that the Cutter would be working for, but I have some friends who might be better informed.” Almost before the words left his mouth, Daredevil had leapt up to grab a fire escape ladder and swung himself up, out of range.

“You find anything out, share the wealth, will you?” Hawkins called at Daredevil’s retreating form. “And look, hornhead! Try not to break any of your well-informed friends too badly looking for information, okay?”

But Daredevil was already on the roof and heading east, which relieved him of the obligation to answer, and to answer truthfully. He cut across town, knowing exactly where he wanted to go.

East of 8th Avenue, most of Midtown’s watering holes were respectable enough: tourist theme bars, white collar taverns for an after-work beer, and here and there a lush bar for the high-end power drinkers. They did good business with their respective clientele, closed at 1 or 2

A.M., stayed out of trouble with the various city inspectors who came by from time to time.

Josie's wasn't one of those bars. You wouldn't find secretaries knocking back margaritas at Josie's; or executives showing off their knowledge of single-malt scotch; or couples from out of town looking for a drink before the curtain went up at the theater. The guys who drank at Josie's were the foot soldiers of crime in New York City: thieves, arm-breakers, thugs. If you bought someone a drink at Josie's, it was likely he'd roll you for the change. Unless you were one of the regulars. Or well connected. Or better armed. Or crazy enough that everyone knew to leave you alone.

Business was good at Josie's tonight. The air conditioner was going full blast, recycling smoky air around the bar in icy gusts. Josie Monahan, the owner, perched behind the bar on a stool, taking a load off her overburdened feet. She was a tall woman, massively obese, with short-cropped, badly over-bleached hair. She had owned the bar for years, paid off inspectors, refereed fights, and turned a tactful blind eye to the illegal negotiations that went on in her place. She kept a baseball bat and a 10mm automatic behind the bar, and had used both more than once to keep the peace. Tonight, however, she had not had to do anything more than pour drinks. The music was going full blast, a peaceable game of pool was in progress, and there were a couple dozen conversations going on, but in the sense that meant the most, things were quiet. Josie liked that.

Josie took one foot out of her broken-down Keds slip-on to examine her swollen ankle. She rotated the foot, then slid it gingerly back. When the door to the bar opened, it took her a moment to look up. Then she saw who was standing there.

Josie swore under her breath.

“Hey, Red!” she called out. “Whatever it is you want, take it outside!”

Daredevil stood, surveying the occupants of the bar. The adrenaline level—and the bar’s ambient temperature—went up five degrees, as the forty-odd drinkers looked around the bar, eyeing each other. Trying to figure out who he’d come for. Trying to guess if there’d be trouble. Looking for the best way to the back door.

“Evening, Josie,” the vigilante said evenly. “Just want to chat with a couple of the guys.”

“Right. Every time you come in to chat, I wind up doing renovations. New plate glass, new tables, new *ribcage* ...” A few years ago, Josie had been shot by someone gunning for Daredevil, and it was safe to say she held a grudge.

By reflex, the big woman had her hand on the baseball bat, but she knew she wouldn’t try anything. The cops you could maybe buy off. The creeps who drank here—the gun and the bat were enough to keep most of them quiet on her property. But Daredevil—what the hell could she do about this guy, who seemingly wasn’t afraid of anything?

“Look, Daredevil, take it outside, please.” Being menacing wouldn’t work; she tried smiling at the man in the red suit, even batting her eyes a bit. “I’m just a business woman, I don’t need the trouble ...”

Daredevil smiled. Grudge or no, if Josie had been just ten years younger, she would have given him the keys to the bar and walked away for that smile. “I don’t want to cause trouble, Josie. Maybe you could ask your patrons to cooperate?”

She sighed, stared out across the room. “Cooperate,” she said hopelessly. Then she turned back to the bar and began polishing the counter busily.

Someone guffawed behind her.

“Oh, crap,” she muttered. Her shoulders drooped. She wondered if she still had the name of that contractor.

Why do the bad guys go to the same bar? Daredevil wondered. The chance to talk shop, maybe—but it also makes them awfully easy to put a finger on when needed.

The room reeked of alcohol and stale hops, of cigarettes and sweat and restrooms that hadn't been properly cleaned since the '64 World's Fair; Josie's penetrating tropical perfume clung to every bottle and glass she had handled, which was all of them; and beneath these smells were traces of industrial cleansers and disinfectant. The jukebox was playing a featureless pop song with an insistent thumping beat; many of the heartbeats in the room were echoing that beat. He scanned the room, filtering out extraneous sensory information, searching for the identifying shape and sounds and scents of his better snitches. Almost instantly he found a couple of likely targets, neither of whom would be happy to see him.

"Okay, boys," he called out to the room at large. "I'm looking for information on the new player in the neighborhood. The one with the knife who carved up that couple in Clinton Plaza last night. He just killed a news vendor on 52nd Street. Anyone got anything they want to share with the class?"

Another laugh from the back of the room.

Almost before the last of the raucous sound rattled against the walls, Daredevil was crouched on the table in front of the laughing man, with his fingers tangled in the guy's tie, nose-to-nose.

"Did you have something to say?" he asked very quietly.

The entire bar seemed to hold its breath.

The laughing man giggled, terrified, and shook his head.

"All right, then," Daredevil began. Then broke off. There was someone behind him with a beer bottle upraised to deliver a blow.

Before the blow could fall, the man in red pivoted on one foot, sweeping out with the other in a kick so powerful it threw his would-be assailant halfway across the room, to

crash into the jukebox, which hiccuped and stopped. Daredevil still had hold of the other man's tie, and turned back to him now.

"Now. Are you just a discipline problem in the making, or do you have something useful to contribute?"

"Ggghhsah!" the man managed. He was heavily built, with a greasy square mustache and a two-day accumulation of beard that Daredevil could feel through his gloves. He smelled bad—sweat and nerves and whatever he'd had to eat in the last couple of days—and his heart was racing. Daredevil loosened his grip on the man's tie. The guy gulped raggedly for air—and then tried to pull sideways, out of Daredevil's grip.

"Naughty, naughty." Daredevil choked up on the tie again.

"Look, I'm not in here looking for you, so why don't you just stop being an idiot. If you know something, tell me. If not..."

The man shook his head vigorously. His eyes were bulging slightly; stress, not lack of oxygen.

Daredevil released the man.

"Didn't—didn't—didn't—" he stammered. "Sorry. When I'm n-n-nervous I lau-ha-ha-ha ..." The thug went into a full scale giggle fit. "Dunno—" he chortled. "Dunno any—"

"I get it." Daredevil looked around the room again. "Anyone else?"

"The Cutter's a freelancer!" someone shouted out. "He don't work for nobody."

"No one knows who he is." A mutter from the back of the bar.

A chorus of voices, all denying any knowledge of the Cutter, started up. At the same time a slight form darted toward the front door, trying to make it out unnoticed.

"All right," Daredevil said grimly. "Keep those ears to the ground, though. You never know when I might take it into my head to come back again." As if to punctuate the

thought, the man he'd kicked began to groan, coming back to consciousness.

With one liquid motion, Daredevil leapt back to the front door, and turned to salute Josie briefly. "No breakage, this time. They're learning," he said, and was gone.

As he went out the door, he heard the big woman's gusting sigh of relief, the six highly imaginative names she called him under her breath, and the slowing of her pulse rate. The murmur of conversation dropped to nothing in the bar, then rose again, louder than before. Business as usual. He turned his attention to the street.

On the sidewalk, he paused for a moment, then darted left down the block, following the man who had left the bar. With a leap he was up on the granite string course of an unoccupied office building; when his target turned around, he saw nothing but empty street. The man turned back, took two more steps—

—and Daredevil was there, right in front of him. Grinning.

" 'Lo, Omar," he drawled. "You in a hurry?"

Omar Glass stood with a defeated slope to his shoulders. "*What?*" he asked plaintively.

He was a tall, skinny man, younger than many of Josie's patrons, with aspirations to be an old-time enforcer. He did little jobs, nasty jobs, for anyone who would pay him, but his real gift was for information: Omar Glass was an old-fashioned gossip with a vicious twist, and mostly found work playing go-between and messenger in the tangled web of New York's underworld. If the Cutter was connected, Omar Glass was the man who would know.

"What do you know about the Cutter, Omar?" Daredevil prompted. He put an arm around the man's shoulders and pulled him into a deep doorway. He tilted his head at Glass expectantly.

"Man, what they told you in there's the truth. No one knows anything! *Least* of all me," Glass added sulkily.

"That, I'll never believe. You always have the latest word." A *little judicious flattery*, Daredevil thought, *can work wonders*. Glass nodded, as if agreeing with the thought. Then a second later, he shook his head.

"S'truth, man. This guy's not tied to anyone. He's got no gig, he's a flipping wild card."

"You're all flipping wild cards, Omar. That's part of your charm."

Glass glared at the hero. "I'm telling you, no one is connected to this guy, and he's scaring everyone to death. No one can figure what he's after—he just *likes* hurting people, man. It ain't logical. And he's making trouble for the rest of us." From the tone of his voice, Daredevil knew exactly what Glass meant: *trouble like this*.

"I can see where the rest of you fine, decent fellows would want him off the streets," the red-suited man drawled. "And I'm trying to do something about it. You'd think you and your playmates would be all over yourselves trying to help."

"Tell you what," he added. He took a step closer to Glass, felt the snitch's heart rate go sky-high for a moment. "I'm going to give you the phone number of a friend of mine. A lawyer. You get any word, Omar, you hear the least little thing about this guy, call the lawyer and give him the info. I'll check in with him—"

"I don't like lawyers!" Glass whined.

"You'd like this one, Omar. He's a defense lawyer. He gets guys like you out of jail after guys like *me* have put them away."

Daredevil pressed a card into Glass's hand. On it were Matt Murdock's name and home phone number.

"Call any hour of the day or night," the hero intoned. "Just like the Foreign Legion. Leave a message, I'll get it. Okay?"

"Yuh-yeah, okay, man. Just leave me alone, okay?"

Daredevil stepped back. Glass looked at the card in his hand, then tucked it in his pocket.

"Don't throw the card away, Omar. I'll know," the man in red said quietly.

Glass shook his head and edged out of the doorway, around Daredevil and onto the sidewalk again.

Daredevil watched him check to see if he'd been observed, then take off running down the street.

Nothing. That was all anyone seemed to know about the Cutter. Daredevil roused out a couple more sources, dug through the human garbage of the neighborhood, but no one had any answers. And the man in red wanted answers *now*. The memory of Hassan Denges, facedown on 11th Avenue in a coppery pool of his own blood, made him cold and angry.

Bad move, bringing this into my neighborhood, he thought. *You don't get to hurt one of my people and walk away.*

In Hell's Kitchen, he noted, the street population was way down. The homeless crowded into St. Bridget's shelter or one farther from home, or were riding the subway or sleeping on a bench in another part of town. The late shows at the movie theaters near the neighborhood were almost empty, and the theater crowd had gone east for their after-show drinks or dinner. It was only the second night of the Cutter's career, and already people were staying off the street, keeping to their homes if they had them. As angered as he was by Hassan Denges's death, and the attack on Lucie Arvalho and her boyfriend the night before, it was the gloss of fear that lay over Hell's Kitchen that really enraged Daredevil.

Wherever you are, he promised, whoever you are, this ends.

Close to 3 A.M., he left off his patrol and started for home. Despite the workout he got moving around the city,

his muscles were still sore from the fight with the Cutter the night before. The swelling and bruises on his face were going down—although he could feel his mask irritating the still-tender skin—but he was aware of how very tired he was. He could work when he was tired—he had pulled off some miraculous stunts when he was just short of collapse. But the energy to pull that off had to come from somewhere. From the nights when he went home and got some sleep.

The instinct to push himself, the feeling he always had that he could do more, should do more, told him to stay on the street and see what he could find out. But another instinct, trained over a decade of patrolling the streets and evaluating the slimmest of data, told him there would be no sign of the Cutter again tonight. It was too quiet, not enough targets out. He wouldn't catch the man with the knife tonight, even if he stayed out 'til dawn.

He turned toward home. Karen would be there now. Daredevil had been wrapped up in anger at the old man's death. Maybe now, at home with Karen, Matt Murdock could feel the loss and the pain that went with it.



CHAPTER FIVE

In the morning, Matt played back the messages on the answering machine.

“Matt? Hi.” The low, hurried-sounding voice belonged to Julie Haupt, his secretary at SNM. “Someone from RenanTech called? They’ve got a meeting set up with you tomorrow at 11 with their CEO? Is this something I should know about?” She sounded aggrieved—hard enough to have her boss out of the office all week without him making appointments she couldn’t keep track of.

At 9 A.M., he called the office. “Julie? It’s Matt. Sorry about the confusion with RenanTech. I put a call in to set up a meeting, but I didn’t expect to hear anything until later today.” He confirmed the time and place of the meeting, then asked, “Did they happen to mention the name of the CEO?”

“Don’t you *know* the name?” Julie sounded disapproving. She had a little-mother-of-all-living complex, especially about her blind boss, and clearly thought he couldn’t take a step without her. “As a matter of fact, the woman who called didn’t give a name. Just said you wanted to set up a meeting and this was when and where. That’s a weird organization.”

“You got that right,” he agreed, and signed off, promising to come by the office later in the day.

Shortly before eleven, a cab dropped him at the entrance to RenanTech’s offices at 53rd and the West Side Highway. The building was an uninteresting cube, seven stories of white-painted brick with old-fashioned glass and aluminum doors and a small metal plaque with a corporate logo on it. Not exactly high-end corporate headquarters: except for the logo, it was a pretty standard West Side warehouse building. The place didn’t appear to need heavy security, although as Louis Bastuto had said, the vacant lot next door could potentially be a magnet for gang kids or other unsavory types.

Matt found himself wondering what exactly it was that RenanTech did. He opened up his folding white cane and entered the building.

Inside, there was a lobby with a few wood-and-vinyl armchairs and a reception desk, all of them fixtures that could have been ordered from an office supply catalogue; the carpet under his feet was economy nylon pile. There were no pictures on the walls, no magazines on the tables, and other than a copy of the metal plaque at the front door that hung over the receptionist's desk, it might have been the lobby of the unemployment offices six blocks away. There was nothing in the lobby to indicate what business RenanTech was in.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist, young and, from the mixture of scents she broadcast, overly made up, did not look up from her magazine. She had the sort of Queens accent rarely found anywhere but old movies, and by her voice, Matt recognized the same woman he'd spoken to the day before.

"Matthew Murdock. I have an eleven o'clock with your CEO."

The woman looked up. Matt heard a slight intake of breath, the reaction some people had when they realized that he was blind. "Oh, I didn't know—" she started. Her voice trailed off in confusion.

"It's hard to tell over the phone," he agreed patiently. "Now, do you think you could buzz through and tell them I'm here?"

He felt the young woman's gaze drop to her phone console. "Oh, God, yes. I mean ..." She punched a button. "Hello? Mr. Murdock is here." She listened for a moment, then hung up. "Uh, they're not quite ready yet. Can you take a seat and they'll—" She jumped up. "I can take you to a chair—"

He waved her off. "Don't worry, I have a lot of practice finding chairs," he told her blandly. He settled himself in

one of the armchairs.

An awkward silence followed. Matt could practically feel the girl staring at him.

"Is there a problem?" he asked at last.

"Your face," she finally said. "Are you okay?"

He'd all but forgotten about the bruises on his face. "This? I walked into a door. Nothing to worry about."

After that she didn't say another word.

Matt waited half an hour before he asked the receptionist to call through again and find out what was happening. She did, got off the line, and promised, "Just a few minutes, sir."

Another half-hour later he was still waiting.

"Do you think you can remind someone that I'm waiting out here?" he asked the receptionist. Again she punched a button and murmured to the person at the other end that Mr. Murdock was still waiting.

Matt leaned forward in his seat, straining his ultrasensitive hearing to pick up any of the other party's words.

"*He's still here?*" he heard a woman at the other end ask irritably.

The receptionist gulped an "uh huh" into the phone, listened a moment, then hung up and turned back to Matt.

"Any minute now," she told him. She didn't sound confident.

Matt sat for another few minutes, scanning the building with his extraordinary senses. There were fewer than thirty people in the whole building, very little activity. A couple of people on the phone, a few more working in—a kitchen?—three stories above. Lots of computers, including several big industrial-sized ones with their own noisy climate control apparatus. Overall he had a sense of quiet busyness about the place—but what were they *doing*!

At last, he heard the crisp brush of footfall on the nylon carpet, and a door opening onto the reception area.

“Mr. Murdock? Ms. Quayle is ready for you now.” A young woman’s voice. Like the receptionist, she was taken aback to discover that he was blind; unlike the receptionist, she gave no outward sign of it. “Can I help you?” she asked.

Okay, hero, play brave, competent, disabled person. “If you can tell me where I’m going, I can manage, thanks.” He unfurled his white cane again, listening to the woman’s directions: door about six feet ahead and to the left, then down a hall about thirty feet, and the last door on the left.

“Thanks for your help. I’m sure I’ll get there.”

With his hypersenses functioning, Matt Murdock could no more have got lost in these offices than he could in his own apartment. Of course, getting “lost” was occasionally a useful way of getting to go places people didn’t want you to go. Now, he went down the long corridor, feeling the grainy snap of nylon carpet underfoot. Lit by fluorescent lights, from the sound and the flickering variations in heat as he passed under them. Low budget all the way.

At the end of the hall, he turned into the office he’d been directed to. It was like walking into Versailles from a convenience store: the buzz of the overhead fluorescents was replaced by the warmth of incandescent lights, the cheap carpet with luxurious pile. The room smelled slightly of lemony furniture oil, and the desk, when he ran a finger along its surface, was massive, wooden with wide beveled edges. High class. Obviously RenanTech had one standard for the CEO and another standard for everyone else.

There was no one in the office.

Matthew Murdock was accustomed to people who disliked and avoided lawyers; he rarely met, however, with a whole company that seemed bound and determined to dislike and avoid him. He could play the “I make you wait five minutes” power game if he had to, but RenanTech—and this Ms. Quayle—seemed to be taking the game to the next level. *Why?*

“Mr. Murdock?”

He felt her enter, and all his questions vanished from his mind.

"Mr. Murdock, I'm Belinda Quayle. I'm so sorry I kept you waiting." Her voice was firm and musical; it hardly mattered that she was utterly insincere. And he could tell that she was beautiful: on the tall side, slender and graceful, fine featured. Her hair was cut to shoulder length and expensively groomed; he caught the scent of her shampoo and conditioner and the other creams and balms she used to maintain her looks. He could hear her smile in her voice, and both were lies. Matt felt an immediate, powerful dislike for Belinda Quayle—and an almost unbearable attraction.

"Please sit down, Mr. Murdock, and tell me what I can do for you." She did not offer to help him find a seat; that could have been respect for his autonomy, but he was pretty sure it was just self-absorption on her part. He found an armchair and sat down.

"Your chief of security may have told you, Ms. Quayle. I represent Louis Bastuto." What was the perfume she was wearing? It was warm and spicy, very sensual. He took a deep breath.

"Bastuto?" She sounded puzzled, but he was certain she was not. "I don't recall the name."

"Louis Bastuto was arrested on your premises two days ago." What color was her hair, he wondered; it would certainly be silky to the touch.

What's going on here? Keep your mind on the problems at hand, Matthew.

Belinda Quayle gave a brief laugh. "Oh, *him*." As if the matter were too small to have made an impression on her. "I don't see why you wanted to see me, Mr. Murdock. It was David your client attacked."

"David being Mr. Wachtel?" Matt asked. "My client has told me a somewhat different story, Ms. Quayle, and

frankly, given the response I've gotten from RenanTech on the matter, I am more and more inclined to believe him."

She laughed again, shaking her head. That released another cloud of scent that hit Matt like a wall. He felt his own pulse speed up.

"Oh, *really*, Mr. Murdock. This man bursts in here, attacks David Wachtel, causes substantial damage to property, and tells you it never happened? One of those men from that—that—homemade homeless shelter on 10th Avenue? *Please*." Her tone was condescending and amused.

"You're talking about the homesteader's co-op that Mr. Bastuto belongs to?" Matt asked.

"Is that what they're calling it?" Polite disbelief. "Really, Mr. Murdock, your client waltzes in here with a baseball bat and grievances he does not perfectly articulate, attacks David Wachtel, destroys property—"

"What property is my client supposed to have destroyed, Ms. Quayle?"

"Oh..." She waved her hand vaguely. "... some furniture in Mr. Wachtel's office, a window, a telephone. The point is, he did it."

"Do you have any idea why my client would have done such a thing?"

She shrugged. "If I thought about it at all, Mr. Murdock, I assumed he was just one of the delusional homeless with a baseball bat."

"Mr. Bastuto says he came to ask about RenanTech's plans to expand into the neighborhood."

"That would be none of his business, now, wouldn't it?"

"On the contrary, as a resident and parent in this neighborhood, I would imagine it was very much his business, Ms. Quayle."

"Someone raises children in a neighborhood like this?" Mock horror in her voice. "I suppose the supply of petty criminals has to come from somewhere."

Matt said coolly, "Lawyers, too, Ms. Quayle. I grew up a few blocks from here." He moved the subject away from himself; at the same time he felt a weird adolescent impulse to tell her all about himself, to hold her attention, maybe get her to like him. *As if*. "Just what exactly does RenanTech do, Ms. Quayle?"

"Genetic engineering. Nanotechnology research. A hope for a better future." She said the words glibly, as if they had no meaning. Whatever Belinda Quayle was, she wasn't concerned with anyone's future except her own. And the conversation wasn't getting them anywhere.

"Ms. Quayle, I'd like you to consider dropping the charges against my client. At worst, I think it was a situation that got out of hand on both sides; if you met Louis Bastuto, I think you'd appreciate that."

"And what could possibly be the benefit to RenanTech of dropping the charges, Mr. Murdock?"

The question, and her slightly suggestive tone, threw Matt for a loop. "Improved relations with the neighborhood, for a start," he managed, after a moment.

"Which would be fine if I wanted to improve our relations with this neighborhood, Mr. Murdock. I don't. In fact, if your client goes to jail it will probably have a salutary effect on our relationship with the neighborhood."

She crossed the room and stood over his chair. This close, her scent was almost impossibly seductive; he felt like a kid in tenth grade again, in awe of the response she aroused in him. He wanted to pull her down into his arms

...

What is this? He forced himself to sit still, trying to ignore the effect she was having on him.

"Besides," she was saying, "your client attacked my associate. I don't want to upset David by dropping the charges." She stepped away from Matt's chair, went back to her desk, pacing back and forth. Her adrenaline was way up, her pulse racing as if she'd just run a mile. "So, I

suppose we really don't have anything to talk about. Can you find your way out?"

Before he could answer, she said, "Of course not— I'm sorry." And she came back to his chair and offered him her arm. He took it and felt as if he were trembling.

She guided him to the hallway, and told him, as her secretary had, that it was thirty feet or so to the reception area. She shook his hand, told him it had been a pleasure talking, and that she regretted she couldn't help him more. Then Belinda Quayle turned on her heel and went back into her office.

Matt Murdock walked out of RenanTech in the grip of two disorienting reactions. One was outrage: like her chief of security, Belinda Quayle had been deliberately, provocatively rude and insulting in so many ways it was hard to keep track. Most liars wanted you to believe the lies they told; it was obvious that Ms. Quayle didn't care one way or the other. Didn't think Matt, or his client, was important enough to lie to convincingly. Which was really bad strategy. And what was wrong with that was that Ms. Quayle was obviously a smart woman. A little too proud of her smarts, of her power, of her ... beauty.

That was the other thing. Even now, as he hailed a cab on the West Side Highway and gave the address of Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock, he was near to trembling with the effect she'd had on him. Her scent, the warmth of her skin, even the heightened pulse and skin temperature that told him she'd lied throughout the meeting—all sent a weirdly, outlandishly seductive message to him. And he'd bought it. It had been tough, throughout the meeting, to focus on the discussion, rather than on the effect she had on him. Never in his life—not even as an adolescent—had any woman ever had the unpleasant, visceral effect on him this woman had. It was nothing like the love he felt for Karen, or even the overwhelming, passionate feeling he'd had for his first love, the woman called Elektra. Nor the heady mix of sexual

attraction and companionship he'd shared with Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow. His attraction to Belinda Quayle was just *weird*. He didn't even like her! What was the woman using for pheromones?

Then, as the cab crawled across town, a thought began to crystalize. He didn't like it. What if his attraction to her wasn't Belinda Quayle's fault? Since yesterday morning, his highly developed senses had been working as always, and he'd gradually forgotten what had happened with the Cutter: his inability to track the guy, the way the killer's heartbeat had seemed to echo and jump around and even stop. Matt had stopped worrying that something might be seriously wrong with his hypersenses. Now he wondered again. What if this time his sense of smell had simply picked up the woman's perfectly normal pheromone output, and had magnified it, gone crazy, made *him* crazy.

What if, after all these years, his hypersenses were breaking down?

What if, after all these years of playing blind, learning to hear and scent and feel things no one else in the world could, he was to be left in the dark again, really in the dark this time?

He put a stop to these thoughts. *If I get distracted by this now, it won't help anyone*, he told himself. There was too much work to do, both as Matt Murdock and Daredevil. Too many people depending on him. No point in making himself crazy until he was certain something was wrong. Certainly no point in saying anything to Karen.

By the time the cab dropped him in front of the building on Madison and 55th in which his office was located, Matt had put the problem way on a back burner, and was back to wondering about Belinda Quayle, Louis Bastuto, and RenanTech's shabby, low-tech front offices.

When the elevator door opened just down the hall from the offices of Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock, the smell of

paint hit Matt hard. For a moment his anxiety about the state of his senses flooded back.

Then Foggy Nelson was at his elbow. "Hey, Matt! Pretty awful, isn't it?" His partner took Matt's arm and guided him through the maze of ladders and drop cloths with which the office was cluttered. "The smell is killing us, I can imagine what it's doing to you," Foggy said in an undertone.

Matt smiled thinly. Already he was working through the smell of paint and solvents, sensing beyond it to pick up the heartbeats and scents of the people in his office. "We're a little understaffed," he noted.

He felt Foggy nod. "You and Rosalind aren't the only ones who're doing extended research outside of the offices. The painters better finish up soon or this practice is going to be a shambles. They've done two walls in your office, two in mine, and of course—"

"Rosalind's has been done for days," Matt finished for him.

Foggy blinked. "You could tell that?" he murmured.

"Nah. Just stands to reason. Besides, you told me so yesterday."

A groan. "The paint fumes are eating my brain cells. D'you think I have a case if I sue?"

Matt laughed. "No. But I do think we should avail ourselves of Rosalind's office in order to preserve your brain cells—and mine. I've got to make a quick call to Karen, then we can talk."

With the door closed and the central air system going full blast, Rosalind Sharpe's office was relatively free of fumes. Foggy gleefully sat in his mother's desk chair and began to roll one of her Mont Blanc fountain pens between his pudgy fingers. Matt, leaving a quick message on the answering machine for Karen, wondered if he was planning to put his feet up on Rosalind's desk, too.

“So, partner? How’d your meeting with RenanTech go?” Foggy asked.

Matt told him. If he had begun to wonder if he’d exaggerated the weirdness of Belinda Quayle’s behavior in the meeting, Foggy’s response reassured him.

“She said *out loud* that she didn’t care what the neighborhood thought? Geez, most big-money people think that, but they won’t say it out loud—especially not to the opposition’s lawyer! Well maybe, given her background ...”

“Her background’s a factor?”

Foggy whistled. “Oh, yeah. Though I’m not sure what it all adds up to. Maybe you can make sense of it, Matt. But RenanTech is playing in the big leagues. It was acquired about six months ago by Quayle-Partido.”

Matt started at the name, and Foggy launched into the details of what he’d learned. “One of the oldest boutique investment houses left on Wall Street—which means they haven’t been absorbed by a big brokerage conglomerate. They basically do whatever the principals decide they should: they’re a brokerage. They do mortgage finance, capital investment, fund management ... all that money stuff you and I went into criminal law to avoid.”

They grinned at each other; theirs was a full-service practice, but neither one of them had really enjoyed the corporate law classes that Columbia had required as part of the J.D. degree.

“Who are Quayle and Partido?” Matt asked.

“You *have* to have heard of them,” Foggy said, almost disbelieving. “They’re like ...” Matt detected him waving his hands about. Obviously he was groping for the right image. “The Scrooge and Marley of Wall Street. Bernard Quayle and Arthur Partido. They’re practically legends: hit the post-World War II stock market and played it like a violin. Bernard Quayle was the real genius of the pair—he was the one who started taking them into mortgage finance, weird kinds of financing that made them a bundle. Their specialty

was coming up with a new collateralized financing scheme, pulling off a bunch of them, then getting out of the business just before the SEC declared the security illegal. Arthur Partido was the numbers guy—maybe a hair less *creative* than his partner, but only a hair. From what I understand, neither Quayle nor Partido was too concerned about the ethics thing.”

“But why would an investment firm acquire a genetic research company?” Matt asked. “And how does Belinda Quayle fit in to all this?”

Foggy folded his hands over his paunch, sounding very pleased with himself. “The first question, I don’t have an answer for. Number two, that’s the easy one. Belinda Quayle is the granddaughter of Old Bernard. Raised as the Crown Princess of Quayle-Partido. And a couple of years ago, when Arthur Partido died, your pal Belinda was—”

The intercom rasped insistently. Foggy answered, listened, said, “Send him in.”

“As I was saying, Belinda was made—Ben!” The portly lawyer sprang to his feet to greet Ben Urich. “I was just sharing a little background with Matthew, here.”

Urich settled himself in an armchair and looked around for an ashtray. There wasn’t one. He sighed regretfully and put his cigarette back in the box. “I called your partner to ask him a question, and we discovered we were both working on the same problem. Talking about RenanTech?” the reporter asked.

“Almost,” Matt agreed. “Foggy’s still trying to get through a sentence about their CEO.”

Urich nodded sagely. “Belinda Quayle. And what’s the sentence, Nelson?”

“As I was saying,” Foggy began playing with the miniature brass and black espresso machine to the left of Rosalind’s desk. “Belinda Quayle was made a partner in Quayle-Partido on Arthur Quayle’s death. And about two

years ago, they acquired RenanTech and Belinda became the company's acting CEO."

Matt closed his eyes, listening to the clicks and scrapes of the brass fittings on the espresso machine as Foggy twirled them, each in turn. "What I'm still not getting," he said, "is why an investment bank buys a high-tech research firm. From what I gathered of Belinda Quayle, a humanitarian desire to stamp out disease is not part of her makeup."

"It's hardly likely she'd be an humanitarian," Ben Urich answered. "She was raised by Bernard after her parents' death—Bernard and a legion of boarding schools, special tutors, and housekeepers. From what I understand, she's a psychological twin of the old man—only fifty years younger and a whole lot better looking." Urich went on with the information he'd wrangled from one of the *Daily Bugle's* financial writers. "You already know that Quayle-Partido acquired RenanTech two years ago. What I've found out that you maybe didn't know is that the company has filed plans with the city for considerable expansion. Potentially, maybe even *blocks'* worth."

Matt whistled. Foggy had abandoned the espresso machine, and now tapped out a drumroll on the desktop with Rosalind's fountain pens.

"However," Urich continued, "I *don't* know what a medical research company needs with that much Hell's Kitchen real estate."

"But it explains why Quayle and Wachtel have the 'kill the peasants' attitude."

At the mention of Wachtel's name, Urich straightened up in his chair. "And that guy is a piece of work!" He grinned. "Matt, you're going to love Mr. Wachtel."

"Oh, I already do," Matt assured him. "But make me love him more."

The story Urich recited sounded like an MBA success story—or a dossier from a true crime book. David Wachtel,

born and raised in a wealthy New Jersey suburb, graduate of Harvard, Wharton Business School dropout. Mr. Privilege, with a long history of small-time legal trouble.

"He sounds like the kind of guy who pulled the wings off butterflies and tortured puppy dogs," Urich said. "And whenever he got in trouble, his Dad would go have a talk with someone—the principal, the chief of police, the dean—and David would be back in again."

"What kind of trouble?" Foggy asked.

"He's a compulsive bodybuilder, an athlete, heavy into sports—not team sports, more the one-on-one adversarial stuff like wrestling, fencing," Urich explained. "He was thrown off the wrestling team at Choate for unnecessary roughness—broke a kid's shoulder. Then he went and did practically the same thing at Harvard. For a while it looked like fencing was his sport—he even talked about going Olympic. Then there was an incident where he brought a live foil to a competition. Cut his opponent up badly, and God knows what that cost his daddy to fix. He should have been expelled, but with only a semester to go, he was barred from campus sports and allowed to graduate. Even so, there were a bunch of incidents in Cambridge, when he was at Harvard, beating the daylights out of townies in bars. Assault charges filed, assault charges dropped. Sounds like Dad's money to me, but I wasn't there. Basically, your overprivileged sociopath."

"Sounds like the guy I talked with," Matt admitted.

"*And*," Urich added, "at Harvard, he was Belinda Quayle's significant other. Supposedly he went to Wharton just to be with her, only he couldn't hack it. But Belinda made it through, got the MBA, went into business with Grandpa and bought RenanTech. Which may explain how your buddy Wachtel comes to be in a position of authority there."

"If I were your client and his neighbors, I'd be pretty nervous about these people," Foggy said.

"And Wachtel emphasized that the people in the neighborhood were competitive, or jealous of RenanTech's success—"

"Success at what?" Urich objected. "They haven't brought a product to market; they're still in a start-up phase."

"Wachtel adds up to a lot less than he should," Matt said thoughtfully. "I can see a company having problems with the residents in its neighborhood, but not because the people were jealous. That just seems completely farfetched."

There was a thoughtful silence in the room for a moment, broken only by the tapping of pens on the desk. Then a firm voice spoke from the doorway.

"Franklin, put my pens down. Would anyone care to tell me what you gentlemen are doing in my office?"

All three men stood immediately. Foggy sputtered, pens still in his hands.

Matt pictured his senior partner in the doorway, arms folded, feet firmly planted, poised for battle. Even for a day at home, Rosalind Sharpe wore a lightweight suit and the three-inch heels intended to add height, and imposing stature, to her trim five feet, four inches. Her hair—dark, except for the shock of ice white hair over her left eye—made an immaculate chin-length cap around her face.

"I thought you were never coming in again, Rosalind," Matt said. It never failed to amaze him how quickly she could put him—and everyone else in the room—on the defensive.

"I lied," she said flatly. She went over to her desk chair, which Foggy had immediately vacated. "Now: did *I* call a meeting? Is that why you're here?"

"Have a heart, Rosalind. The rest of the office reeks of paint; yours is the only room that the painters are done with." Matt had settled back in his chair, claiming turf.

Urich, following his lead, sat down again also. Only Foggy, hit by the double-whammy of his partner's disapproval and his mother's scolding, stood, bouncing nervously on the balls of his feet.

Rosalind looked down at her desk. "Franklin, what on earth is this?"

"What, Rosalind?" Foggy asked, in a voice that fooled no one.

"The six lines on this pad on which you've written 'Bernard Quayle = Death.' What on earth have you to do with Bernie Quayle?"

Ben Urich and Foggy Nelson turned to look at Matt Murdock. He turned in Rosalind Sharpe's direction.

"*Bernie* Quayle?" Matt asked. "You know him?"

Rosalind smiled. "Of course. My first job, after I finished clerking in Judge Roseman's office, was working at Quayle-Partido. Bernie was ..." her voice lowered thoughtfully "... a great teacher."

"Great teacher?" Foggy echoed.

"I wasn't always the polished gem you see now, Franklin. I learned a great deal from Bernard Quayle."

"Rosalind, he has the business ethics of a piranha," Foggy protested.

"Judiciously applied, the business ethics of a piranha can be very useful," Rosalind said coolly. "And business wasn't the only thing I learned from Bernie."

Matt heard Foggy's quick intake of breath, felt the warmth of his partner's blush from across the room. "You and Quayle ..." Foggy said faintly.

Matt felt for him. "Rosalind, are you still in touch with Quayle?"

She shook her head. "Only occasionally, Matthew. Why?"

Quickly, Matt sketched in the connection between Louis Bastuto and Bernard Quayle's company, the rumored expansion of RenanTech and the reaction of the people in their Hell's Kitchen neighborhood.

Predictably, their senior partner came down on the side of Quayle and RenanTech. "I'm sure the problem is with these tenant organizers or whatever they are, not with Bernard or his company. But if you like, I'll give Bernard a call and see if we can get this Louis Basmati's case settled out. In the meantime, I'd appreciate it if all three of you boys would get out of my office. There's *real* work to do. I cannot believe that my two partners are sitting here wasting billable hours on a case like this!"

Matt was tempted to tell her about the hour and a half he'd spent waiting in RenanTech's lobby, but decided not to. If Rosalind could pull a string with Bernard Quayle and make the charges against Louis Bastuto go away, he could forgo the opportunity to pull his partner's chain.



Karen Page pushed the REPEAT button on the answering machine, blessing Matt. He had found a moment to talk to Louis Bastuto's wife, Amy, to get permission for Karen to call her. It was like him to find a spare moment in a crazy day to help her out. From the few brief words of his message, she gathered that Bastuto's case was getting increasingly weird. As if Matt didn't have enough to worry him, with his usual caseload and his other life as Daredevil.

Last night, Karen had listened to Matt talk about Hassan Denges, had tried to comfort his sadness at the old man's death. It seemed so easy for Matt to compartmentalize: to tap into the rage that crime and cruelty inspired in him in order to be Daredevil, or to find the broad streak of generosity and empathy that made Matt Murdock a brilliant lawyer. She loved Matt deeply, but Daredevil... sometimes it was hard not to see Daredevil as a rival. At those times, she'd learned to turn to her own work, to get involved in something that mattered to her. Like investigating this business with the homesteaders in Louis Bastuto's building.

What did they think of this whole business with the Cutter, she wondered. For that matter, why did the Cutter choose to kill in Hell's Kitchen? Everyone knew—everyone being the thugs and their bosses, all the way up to the Kingpin of Crime—that Hell's Kitchen was Daredevil's turf. Why come to a neighborhood that had a sworn protector? What did the Cutter hope to prove?

She looked at the number she'd scrawled on the back of a Con Ed envelope. Matt's message said that as of this afternoon, nothing she—or her radio talk show persona, Paige Angel—could do would make RenanTech behave *less* cooperatively. If everything Matt had told her about Louis Bastuto and his family and the homesteader's cooperative was true, maybe Paige Angel could apply a little judicious pressure over the airwaves. *If* that was okay with Amy Bastuto. Matt had said she was shy, very soft spoken, and

might not be happy about being interviewed. No way to find that out without calling.

She picked the phone up again. "Time to use my power for good."

The phone was picked up on the first ring. The voice at the other end was not what she was expecting. It was a brusque, forceful, woman's voice with a slight Boston-Irish lilt.

"Uh ... Mrs. Bastuto?" Karen ventured.

"She's resting. And if this is another of those calls, please be advised we've notified the police and—"

Yikes! thought Karen. "I'm not calling to bother her! My name is Karen Page. I'm calling at the suggestion of Mr. Bastuto's attorney, Matthew Murdock."

Karen heard the sound of murmured conversation in the background, and then the woman came back to the phone. "Forgive my abruptness, Ms. Page. It's been a little chaotic here, and I've taken to answering the phone for Amy.

"What?" she said to whoever she was conversing with. Again, murmuring, then the woman came back. "Mr. Murdock said you might be calling. From the radio, right?" She sounded cautious.

"Yes, Ms. ... ?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Siobhan Sealy. As I said, I've been answering the phones for Amy. Listen, Ms. Page, maybe this would be easier if you came round to the house. In fact, if you're really interested in what we're doing here, and the problems we're facing, come to the co-op meeting tonight, 7 P.M. The police have promised to send someone, and maybe the mayor's office, too. And afterward you and Amy and I could talk. Is that possible?"

It was possible.

At a few minutes to seven that evening, Karen Page was walking down 10th Avenue, looking at the tired, graffitied-over brick tenements that lined the street. A few were

boarded up completely; in the others, windows were duct-taped together, or missing. Women sat out on fire escapes that looked like they might disintegrate under them, calling to children who dodged in and out of the doorways below. Hell's Kitchen, just like always.

And then she saw the second building in from the corner of 52nd Street. Like the other buildings that lined 10th Avenue, it was probably ninety years old or more. But unlike the rest of the buildings on the street, this one was clean. No graffiti fouled the front of the building, and the decorative brickwork over the windows had been restored; the ironwork above the doorway was freshly painted, and the granite steps and doorway were clean. Upstairs, she noted, the windows were all new, and the fire escape was freshly painted and solid-looking.

"Wow," she murmured. "This must be the place."

In the building's foyer, a hand-lettered sign that said MEETING IN 1B: PLEASE RING TO BE ADMITTED had been taped to the frosted glass of the front door. Karen pushed the buzzer. The tile on the floors had been cleaned and lovingly restored; the brass mailboxes were freshly polished; even the wooden moldings in the hallway had been stripped and varnished. She had expected the old building to be livable; she had not expected to find this level of care.

The meeting was in a vacant apartment at the end of the first floor hallway. Stepping in, Karen was startled. It looked like sixty people had crammed into the empty living room, the dining room, and the kitchen beyond. The buzz of so many conversations packed into so small a space was deafening. She squeezed into the room, wondering how she would locate Amy Bastuto and Siobhan Sealy. As it turned out, she didn't have to.

"You'll be Karen Page." The woman who greeted her was short, slender, and gray-haired, with pale, heavily freckled skin and startlingly black eyebrows. She took Karen's hand in her own for a brief, firm handshake, smiled—and was

transformed from nondescript to unforgettable. "I'm Siobhan Sealy," she said. "Amy Bastuto's over there."

She pointed to a quiet, tired-looking woman in her mid-thirties with short, dark hair and the parallel creases between her brows of a born worrier. In her arms, a toddler slept with the heavy, abandoned exhaustion of a three year old. Two more children, maybe six and eight years old, sat on the floor by Amy Bastuto's knee, quietly working on coloring books.

"You go introduce yourself, Karen. I've got to get things started. We'll talk after, all right?" Without waiting for an answer, but with another dazzling smile, Siobhan Sealy was gone.

Karen threaded her way through the crowd to introduce herself to Mrs. Bastuto. She had hardly begun to do so when Siobhan's voice rose over the roar of conversation in the room and called the meeting to order.

"Okay, okay, we've got a lot of stuff to deal with tonight, so let's get started." The faint Irish lilt Karen had detected on the phone was more obvious when Siobhan was talking to a crowd; that powerful, deep and musical voice had everyone's attention immediately. "First of all, I know we're all concerned about this man they're calling the Cutter. Detective Sergeant Hawkins from the Midtown South Precinct is here to give us an update."

She smiled at the policeman as she offered him the floor, but Karen noted a look that said, *Make it good, boyo*.

"I'd like to thank you for inviting me," Hawkins said. He was a tall man, African American, his head freshly shaved. He wore conservative clothes: a summer-weight suit that was probably too hot in the airless apartment, white shirt, maroon tie. Karen wondered if the clothes indicated a conservative temper-ment, or just a guy who didn't want to think about what he wore. From his expression, Karen guessed he'd rather be anywhere else. Doing a community

relations gig was obviously not his idea of a fun way to spend the evening.

"As most of you have probably heard, we have a team working to apprehend the Cutter as speedily as possible. We have limited forensic evidence at this time, but we do have a description of our suspect. Unfortunately, he wears a mask; however, our witnesses describe him as being well above average height and weight, dressed in black—and there aren't that many guys in the neighborhood who go masked ..."

It was an attempt at humor. It fell flat.

"I'll have an artist's rendering of the suspect to pass out to you all at the end of your meeting. I must emphasize: if you believe you have sighted the suspect, *do not attempt to approach him yourself*. Call 911, or the precinct house." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small stack of business cards. "Or you can call my line directly."

Hawkins looked out at the audience with an expression of vague apprehension. Karen felt sorry for him—it wasn't going to be enough for these folks, just saying *Hey, we're working on it*. But there wasn't much else he could truthfully say.

"Until the Cutter is apprehended, we strongly recommend that you stay indoors after dark, and if you must be outside, travel with one or more people."

"In other words, hurry up and forget it!" someone yelled.

"Yeah!" said another. "Hell's Kitchen doesn't rate the same kind of attention as Uptown, or the East Side. They'd be all over this like white on rice if—"

"East Side wouldn't be on this case any harder than we are at Midtown South," Hawkins said calmly. "Look, folks, this man is fast, he is powerful, and we are still working to determine a pattern to his attacks—"

"That means he's gotta kill someone else before you can figure out who he's going to attack after *that*, right?" This

from an obese, grizzled man in a blinding Hawaiian print shirt.

"If the police can't find this S.O.B., maybe Daredevil or one of those guys will!" the woman next to Hawaiian Shirt yelled tauntingly. She and the fat man turned to congratulate each other on points scored.

"I want this guy off the street as much as you do, but I hope the police get him, not some costumed paranormal. You may think they're heroes, but our conviction rate on super hero catches is fifty percent of—"

"Yer just jealous 'cause the department didn't issue *you* any tighties!" Hawaiian Shirt roared. People laughed, but the crowd was also beginning to look uncomfortable, like most of them didn't want to antagonize Hawkins or the department.

"Enough of that, Tony!" Siobhan Sealy broke in. "I don't see you helping much of anyone with anything these days. You're here by courtesy as a resident of the neighborhood, but you're not a member of the co-op, and I'll have you put out if you keep taunting our *guest*, don't think I won't!" She glared fiercely at the man in the loud shirt, who grimaced but backed down. "Now, Claire, you had a question?"

A young, slight woman asked anxiously, "Can you tell us when you think you'll catch him?"

Hawkins ran a hand over his face. It was hot in the room; all those people crammed in so tightly. Karen felt bad for him—of course they'd want more than the detective could promise. Hawkins was attempting to answer the last question when Siobhan Sealy stood up and joined him at the front of the room.

"Claire, it's obvious the Cutter's not giving the police much to go on yet. We'd all like them to put out their hands and grab him out of thin air, but I don't count on that happening. So right now, perhaps the best thing we can do about the Cutter is what the detective suggests: not make

ourselves targets. Now, for people who do need to be about of an evening..."

And she began recruiting a group of men for escort duty, walking people to and from the subway or bus stops after dark. Karen watched in amazement as Sealy took names and shaped a plan out of thin air. Sergeant Hawkins unobtrusively moved from the front of the room to the back, and stood listening.

"By the by," Siobhan added, "there'll be a service for Mr. Denges on Thursday. I'll post the time and place when I have it. Those of you who can, we're taking a collection for his daughters, to help with the funeral expenses. Now, as far as our neighbors to the west are concerned—"

The talk suddenly shifted to RenanTech, and Louis Bastuto. Amy Bastuto sat still, nodding to acknowledge the gestures and looks of support from the crowd, as Siobhan brought the crowd up to date on Louis's situation. "His lawyer is trying to get the charges dropped, but RenanTech, we hear, is being a little less than cooperative."

"Like that's something new?" Hawaiian shirt grumbled.

"They're gonna lawyer Louis into jail! What's it gonna take to get through to them they can't bulldoze our homes into the ground?"

Again the crowd began shouting. Again, Siobhan's voice rang out, cutting through the noise and calling the meeting back into some sort of order.

"Look, you cannot say or think anything nastier about those S.O.B.s than I have myself," she said. "But that's not constructive. So, we have two separate problems here: Louis's case and the larger issue of what RenanTech is planning—and how to block it. I've talked to Louis's attorney—he's an old Hell's Kitchen boy himself, name of Murdock." One or two heads nodded around the room. Sealy went on. "I think Louis is in as good hands as can be for the moment, though I'm sure he'd rather be home with

Amy and the kids. And she's asked me to thank the people that's been helping out the last couple of days."

Amy Bastuto smiled over the top of her baby's head; people returned the smile, waved. One kid raised a fist in salute.

"On to RenanTech itself," Siobhan continued. "I just spent the last two days downtown, surfing through records. The news is not great: RenanTech has filed some sort of preliminary expansion plans with the zoning board. I've got a request in to get a copy, but it takes a couple of days. Now, barring significant protest, the plans would probably be approved—"

There was a roar of dismay.

"I said barring significant protest!" Siobhan yelled. "That's *us*. We are fighting for our neighborhood, our homes. We have to out-marshal RenanTech, and we're going to do it. But that means I need people helping me ..."

She rattled off names of agencies they had to file protests with, assigned people to contact councilmen, find out who to talk to, write letters, make phone calls.

Karen couldn't decide whether Siobhan Sealy was Joan of Arc or George S. Patton, but she got people raising their hands and volunteering.

The meeting ran almost two hours. It was hot, noisy, and chaotic, swinging from bureaucratic list-making to cheerleading. When it was over, Karen found herself shepherded upstairs to the Bastutos' apartment, where Amy Bastuto handed her a glass of iced tea, then disappeared to put her children to bed. Siobhan drank her own tea in a few hurried gulps.

"So now you know what we're up to, down here. What do you think?"

"I think," Karen said carefully, "that I'd like to get you on my radio show."

Sealy's face lit up. "When?"

Karen thought about what Matt had told her. Maybe a little pressure from the media would help get Louis Bastuto home with his family, sooner rather than later.

She grinned. "How about tonight?"

Sealy returned the grin. "How about it? What time?"

Karen stood up. "How about now?"

Sealy's grin widened. "How about it? Give me a minute to tell Amy we're going, and I'm ready."

On the West Side Highway, the early-evening sunlight was starting to fade; all that was left were a few brilliant dazzles in the warehouse windows as the sun dropped below the horizon of the Hudson and the New Jersey shoreline. The air was balmy and soft on the skin. Elsewhere in the city, people were headed home from work, climbing out of the subways and off the buses, passing each other with the live-and-let-live indifference of summertime. Except here. Except in Hell's Kitchen.

This was a neighborhood that had seen its share of trouble: arson, drugs, gang wars, turf disputes between crime lords, even showdowns staged by super-villain wanna-bes who came to challenge Daredevil, and viewed Midtown West as a convenient jousting place. In Hell's Kitchen, you grew up keeping an eye out, locking the door and bolting it, walking on the lighted side of the street. When the crime rate dropped in New York City, it stayed the same in Hell's Kitchen; when the rate went up, Hell's Kitchen led the way. The people of Hell's Kitchen knew how and when to lay low and wait until the shooting stopped. Survival, that was the point.

When something happened, they acted fast. Like now, with the Cutter.

Already people were walking places in pairs, eyeing the dark of doorways and alleys, watching for the new threat that hung over their neighborhood. They might stop at the bodega to buy milk or cat food, pause to greet a neighbor

or to pay a moment's respect to the shattered newsstand on 11th and 53rd, decked in the yellow ribbons of a crime scene. But everyone had the same goal: get home. While it was still light. While it was still safe.

David Wachtel left the RenanTech offices a little after eight, when twilight was setting in for good. He had no friends in the neighborhood, had no intention of becoming chummy with the locals, so no one told him it wasn't wise to walk after dark these days. Usually Wachtel caught a cab on West Side Highway and headed downtown to his Tribeca loft; but tonight, he turned down 54th Street and sauntered along the deserted side street. On one side, the building that housed RenanTech loomed: windowless, almost featureless. On the other, three separate abandoned warehouse buildings: high-set windows cracked or missing, paint peeling, doors covered with plywood. Three of the street's five pink, high-intensity street lamps were out; the combination of sunset and uneven street lighting cast eerie shadows around and between the parked panel trucks. It was not a street that inspired confidence after dark.

That didn't seem to bother Wachtel, however. He put his hands in the pockets of his expensive summer suit jacket and walked east toward 11th Avenue, whistling short bursts of tuneless music. The watcher who tracked Wachtel moving down the street wondered if the man was fearless or just stupid. Wachtel was a big guy, tall, broad shouldered and heavily muscled; he probably worked out a lot. But muscles alone wouldn't protect him against the Cutter's knife. Not if he didn't have brains. And a well-oiled survival instinct.

The watcher moved from the shadows and walked quietly up the street, staying on the far side and well back from his quarry. Peering from behind a panel truck, he saw Wachtel stop at the plywood door of the warehouse nearest 11th Avenue. Wachtel looked around cautiously—was he getting some smarts about the Cutter?—then tugged on the

heavy door. The three-quarter inch plywood moved easily, and Wachtel vanished into the warehouse with no more than a backward glance.

The watcher went forward, to follow.

The padlock on the plywood door had been locked open. The watcher pulled on the rope loop that served as a handle for the door; it barely moved. He pulled again, feeling the weight of the plywood sheet shimmy against his hand as the door swung slowly open. Inside, it was very nearly pitch black. Sparse light from the surviving street lamps filtered in through the grimy, high-set windows, just enough to make a sullen pink glow that threw the wires and ducts on the ceiling into relief and make lurking shadows of the fixtures and boxes on the floor. The watcher glanced around from the doorway, apprehensive. Already he was regretting following Wachtel into this place.

But a job was a job.

He put a hand out, felt in the dark until he touched a thick rope that had been strung like a guide wire across the room. Holding onto the rope, the watcher stepped into the darkness, making his way across the room and into another. This one was just as large as the last, the ceilings were as high, the dust and clutter as thick. The only difference was the two canvas chairs that sat at the far end of the room, and the single work light clipped to the wall above the chairs.

David Wachtel sat in one of the chairs, legs crossed.

"Hey, Omar," he said.

The watcher moved toward the light, drawn like a moth. The darkness seemed to close in behind him, impelling him forward.

"Hey," he said.

Wachtel called him Omar, which was okay—except that the one time he'd returned the favor and called the big man David, he'd thrown a fit. Omar Glass's father had been a pickpocket; his uncle had been, briefly and gloriously, a

soldier in the Kingpin's crime army. Pretty much everyone Glass knew was a bad guy, so his definition of trustworthy was necessarily flexible and forgiving.

Omar Glass did not trust David Wachtel.

Still, he paid well, and on time. He knew the value of the services Omar provided, never any bargaining or weaseling about money.

"Lovely evening," Wachtel said easily.

Glass nodded. "If you like it hot," he said. "But I gotta say, man, you oughtta use a little caution. That freak Cutter guy is playing in this neighborhood, and he could make a mess outta that pretty suit. I was right behind you coming in here, and I didn't see you look around once. Could'a been a flippin' army on your tail, man, and you'd'a never known it 'til it was too late."

Wachtel threw his head back and laughed. In the overhead light his fair hair was the same color as his summer-weight suit, a warm bronze. His skin was deeply tanned, and his eyes, when he opened them again, were gray-blue. He looked, to Glass's jaundiced eye, like some stupid model from *GQ* or something. *But he pays real good*, Glass reminded himself, and laughed a little to keep Wachtel company.

"Omar, I'm touched by your concern, but I promise you I'm well armed. The Cutter would not lay a glove on me." Wachtel chuckled again, as if it were all one big joke. "But you followed me in here? Did the meeting break up so early? Frankly, I'd expected I'd have to wait a while for you to show up."

Glass heard something that threatened displeasure in Wachtel's tone. "I left the meeting to get here to meet you," he began. "There was cops all over the place at that meeting, a couple of them know my face and woulda wondered what I was doing there. Ain't like I live in the neighborhood."

“They had police there?” Wachtel uncrossed his legs and sat up. “I think you’d better tell me a little more about this meeting.”

Glass leaned forward. “It started out about the Cutter, and what was the police doing about him, that kind of thing. They had a detective from Midtown South in, Hawkins. Gave ‘em a whole lotta nothing.”

Wachtel smiled. “The police can’t get a bead on the Cutter? *What* a surprise. So the meeting was really just about the Cutter?”

“Well, mostly. Toward the end, though, they started talking about something else.” Glass knew what Wachtel was interested in. “That woman runs the co-op on 52nd? Chiffon Sealy? She’s been downtown at the zoning board, and she was talking about RenanTech expanding, and what they were going to do about it. I didn’t hear it all—I had to get going to meet you. *And* I thought I caught Hawkins looking my way.”

Wachtel stood up, so that his face was out of the range of the light and his voice came out of darkness. “I wish you’d *stayed*, Omar.” The singsong of the words emphasized the menace under them. Glass shifted uneasily in his seat.

“It wouldn’ta done you any good for me to get taken in for questioning. I wouldn’t say anything, but they’d gotta wonder what I was doing there.” When Wachtel was silent, he added, “You gotta know I’m not going to say anything to the cops, Mr. Wachtel. I got as much to lose as you do. *More*, after some of the jobs I’ve done for you. Anyway, I think the meeting was just about done.”

Wachtel sighed. Then he asked a couple of pointed questions about Sealy. Glass gave the other man a description and Sealy’s apartment number.

“What’s her name? Chiffon?” Wachtel asked.

Glass shook his head. “Nah. One of those Irish names. Shee-vahn.”

Wachtel took a fountain pen from the breast pocket of his suit and handed it to Glass. "Spell it," he said tersely.

Omar took the pen, then looked for a piece of paper. He dug his hands into one pocket—nothing but keys and a cigarette lighter—and then into the other, which yielded a fistful of paper slips. He started rifling through the papers, looking for one that was blank, and dropped them all.

"Oh, *ma-an!*" Glass dropped to one knee, grabbing for the fluttering slips of paper. ATM slips, OTB receipts, cab receipts, deli receipts skirled around him as he tried to sweep them all together and still find one he could sacrifice for Wachtel. After a moment, Wachtel bent down to sweep a couple of pieces of paper back within Glass's grasp. He picked up one, read it, then handed it to Glass.

"Write it on this," he said.

Glass took it, realized it was a business card. Written in block letters on the card were the words Matt Murdock and a phone number. "No, man, I might need that one," he said, and picked out a deli receipt. "Here."

He wrote Siobhan's Sealy's name out on the receipt and handed it, and the pen, back to Wachtel. "That do?"

Wachtel pocketed the paper and slipped the pen back into his pocket. "Just fine, Omar."

"You got any more work, Mr. Wachtel?"

Wachtel shook his head, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a money clip fat with neatly folded bills. He peeled off two worn hundreds and handed them to Glass. "Nothing right now, Omar. But you never know what may come up, do you?"

Omar Glass grinned. "Nope. Never do. We all done?"

Wachtel nodded. Glass stuffed the bills into his pocket with all the receipts and miscellany, nodded at the other man, and left. It was fully dark outside now, the shadows cast by the streetlights even eerier than they had been earlier. Omar Glass was relieved to reach 11th Avenue.

Whatever Wachtel said, the Cutter was out there, and Glass wanted to be somewhere safe.

David Wachtel sat in the near-dark of the warehouse, looking at the slip of paper in his hands with the words *siobhan sealy* written in Omar Glass's spidery handwriting. Wachtel was not particularly concerned about Sealy. She could be taken care of, just as her friend Louis Bastuto had been. If necessary, Wachtel and RenanTech could pick off any neighborhood troublemakers one by one until there was no further objection to RenanTech's plans for Hell's Kitchen. There were ways. He smiled thoughtfully. *That* was the easy part.

He turned the paper over and over between thumb and forefinger. Something else was nagging at him. There was something about the card he'd picked up from the untidy scatter of Omar Glass's pockets, and he couldn't quite place it. Wachtel wrinkled his nose in distaste at the mess Glass carried around in his pockets. He liked things neat. Liked all the loose ends neatly tucked in or snipped off. Which is why it bothered him that he couldn't put his finger on what was bothering him. Forgetting something meant a loose end was straggling somewhere, ready to trip him up. Embarrass him. Expose him.

The cuff of his left sleeve was half an inch shorter than the right. He shot his arm out, checked the cuff, found it was now even with the right cuff. Better. Like everything else, looking good was in the details. You could spend a fortune on the clothes—he admired his Armani suit and the high-polish Bally shoes—and still look like hell because you forgot the details.

There was only one place for untidiness, he thought. Shook his head. Now wasn't the time to think about that.

What was it he was forgetting?

Wachtel prided himself on his brains. Forgetting something made him apprehensive, as if he'd left an end hanging somewhere, something that could come back and

embarrass him. He didn't like being embarrassed, especially when the people around him, most of them, were idiots. He liked to feel that he handled a job better than anyone else could have. It was one of the reasons he'd dropped out of Wharton B-School—the instructors were morons, expecting you to answer their way, look at things their way. After a semester he knew he'd have to get out before he punched someone's lights out. He hadn't been willing to play the game, get along to get the degree, and he felt distaste for the people who did. Except for Belinda, who had stayed, got the degree, played the game. Well, Belinda was beautiful and she was smart, but she had done it to please the old man, that withered old monster Bernard Quayle. There was no one David Wachtel had to please but himself.

But he didn't want to show any weakness to Bernard, or to Belinda, either. And this thing that was nagging at him could trip him up later. What wasn't he remembering?

The card had said matt murdock, with a phone number.

Wachtel leaned back, tilting the canvas chair until it tipped off its front legs and his shoulders were braced against the rear wall. The overhead light shone on his knees—he flicked a bit of dirt from his pants—and he stared into the darkness, trying to see the thing he had forgotten there. Was it in the far past? Recent past? What visual association did it have? No visual association at all?

The picture that finally formed in his head was of a golf club. His office. A white ball rolling lazily across the dark red carpet.

Matt Murdock was the name of Louis Bastuto's lawyer.

Wachtel sat up, the front legs of his chair coming down with a clunk on the concrete floor. Omar Glass had the phone number of Louis Bastuto's lawyer. What did *that* mean? Glass was a criminal, maybe Murdock was the kind of ambulance-chasing lawyer who gave out his business cards to creeps like Omar Glass. But Wachtel's gut told him

that wasn't the case. So what else could it mean, but that Omar Glass was playing both sides of the game. Which was a very, very big mistake for Omar Glass to make.

For a moment Wachtel felt a flutter of panic. Not because he couldn't handle the problem, but because it had been *so close*. What if he hadn't figured it out? But he had. Now he could find out what it meant and fix it before there were leaks. Before Belinda found out. Or her grandfather. He could even turn this to his advantage.

Wachtel left the warehouse and stepped out into the darkness of 53rd Street. As he walked back toward the West Side Highway, he whistled bursts of tuneless music, and there was a bounce and a confidence in his walk. Almost a challenge.

Everything was under control.

Studio 3 at WFSK was almost dark, lit by a forty-watt tensor lamp on the desk, and the shifting red and green glows of the room's equipment. The on air sign cast a ruby light on one side of the studio; the control room beyond the soundproof glass was almost as dark.

Karen Page liked to do her show in near darkness. It made it easier for "Paige Angel," her on-air alter ego, to perform. Karen put into "Paige" all of her curiosity, her cynicism, her sympathy for the ideas and fantasies of the people who called in to her show. But there was something else about the show for Karen. It allowed her a safe place to perform, to play a role. She had loved acting once, and it had led her as close to hell as she ever hoped to come. That was a long time ago, now. With painful effort, chance, and the help of friends she thought she had driven away, she had gotten her life back. Got away clean, except for the memories. In ways Karen Page didn't talk about, "Paige Angel" helped her exorcise the last bad demons of that ugly time. And if she could help her listeners just a little, or

someone like Louis Bastuto, that was better than good: it was redemption.

In her earphone, the station ID wound up. In the booth, her engineer, Patrick Hinds, pointed at her. Back on the air.

“Okay, we’re back,” Karen’s voice—Paige’s voice—was low, sultry, inviting and challenging at the same time. “I’m talking with Siobhan Sealy, homesteader and, as of this evening, head of a coalition of Hell’s Kitchen residents who are fighting against the planned expansion of a corporation which—they feel—threatens their homes. Siobhan, one of your neighbors has had a pretty rough run-in with RenanTech.”

In a moment Karen and Siobhan had sketched out Louis Bastuto’s story. “He went to talk, that’s all,” Siobhan Sealy insisted. “I can’t believe they’d have him put in jail for talking.”

“According to RenanTech, Mr. Bastuto was trespassing ... and he brought a baseball bat to do his talking for him.” Karen trod carefully, playing devil’s advocate.

“Paige, I walked Louis over to the RenanTech offices. Originally, I was the one was going to go ... but I have a bit of a temper, and a couple of my neighbors thought Louis would be the more diplomatic one. So we talked, last minute, about what he should say, what he should ask. I can tell you this: he no more had a baseball bat when he walked into those offices than I do now.”

Karen kept up the devil’s advocate approach. “Couldn’t he have got hold of a baseball bat at RenanTech?”

Sealy sat straighter, her eyes lit with indignation. “Well, I suppose so. But even if he did—and I’d stake my life he didn’t, I know Louis Bastuto—what does that do to RenanTech’s position that he came armed, intending to do mischief? Even if he did swing that bat—and he told his wife that he didn’t—it might well have been in self-defense, once they’d made it plain they didn’t like what he was saying.”

Karen looked down at the board. The phone lines were lit up, and Patrick was making hand signs that clearly meant, *start taking calls!*

"Okay, let's hear what some of our neighbors think about all this," she said smoothly, and punched the button for line one.

A woman's voice, middle aged and angry. "Hi, Paige? I just want to say that it's just what I'd expect of big businesses in this city! When my husband was laid off—"

She let the woman rant for a moment or two, thanked her for her input, hit another button. Jack from Forest Hills figured that a company like RenanTech wouldn't bother about a little guy like Bastuto unless he'd done something wrong. Donna from Bensonhurst wanted to know more about urban homesteading.

Then Esther from the Bronx called to ask about that other threat to the neighborhood, the Cutter.

"It's frightening to have a madman on the loose," Sealy agreed. "The police say they're on it—Sergeant Hawkins was at our meeting tonight to give us an update. Clearly, this Cutter guy only attacks the weak and the helpless—a blind old man like Hassan Denges, for pity's sake! Well, the only thing to do with a bully and a coward is face him straight on. The community is taking steps to see that poor Mr. Denges is that madman's last victim. Hell's Kitchen doesn't strike people as much of a neighborhood, but when we band together, nothing—not a mad slasher nor a corporation bent on expansion at the expense of our families—can win."

Siobhan then steered the topic away from the Cutter and back to Louis Bastuto, the homestead coalition, and RenanTech, and there it stayed for the rest of the show.

Siobhan argued and answered, with Karen stepping in adroitly from time to time to smooth rough edges, ask a question, guide the speaker back on topic. Just once, when a caller suggested that the co-op residents had no right to

impede RenanTech's progress, did the temper Sealy had mentioned show itself. She tore the notion into shreds—but not the caller, Karen noted. And when she was done she looked around as if she was startled to find herself sitting in the dark wearing a pair of headphones.

"Well," she said breathlessly, "I guess you touched a nerve there."

It was almost a shock when Patrick gestured at the clock.

"Patrick's telling me it's time to shut down for the night. I want to thank Siobhan Sealy for taking time to come over and talk, and all the people who called in to share their thoughts. This is Paige Angel on WFSK, New York. Now it's time for bed. Close your weary eyes and dream of me."

The on air sign flickered out. Siobhan Sealy sat back in her chair, looking tired and exhilarated, both.

"You get to do this *every night*?" she asked, grinning. "That's *fun*."

Karen laughed. "It is when I have a good guest and some good callers. Sometimes it's like pulling teeth. Well, I hope we did you guys—and Louis and Amy—some good tonight."

Sealy picked up the oversized tote bag that served as her pocketbook and strung it over her shoulder. "I think we did. Listen, even if half of New York believes RenanTech is above reproach, or like that weird guy who called who thinks that us mere humans should get out of the way of the big corporations—it'll make it that much harder for RenanTech to pull anything, now that so many people are aware of them. This was a good night's work, Karen, and I thank you." She smiled that engaging, elfin smile again, but Karen saw the papery skin around her eyes, the wince of fatigue.

"You're welcome. The pleasure was mine," Karen told her. "Listen, I'm going to grab a cab. Can I drop you somewhere?"

Siobhan nodded gratefully. “That would be dear of you. I’m that tired, and frankly, my income doesn’t much run to taxis, even at the dead of night.”

“Great. Let me say goodnight to Patrick, grab my jacket, and we’re gone.”

The man the papers called the Cutter sat in the dark, listening to the radio. He didn’t normally like radio, hated talk shows, but the call had come in, and the low voice at the other end had told him—insisted—that he should be listening. He didn’t recognize the voices on the broadcast, but what they were saying ...

He looked at the display on the stereo, looked so hard that even the shadows disappeared and all he could see in the world were the blue numerals on the display, showing the frequency of WFSK. The numerals jumped erratically with every pulse of his heart. As if they were dancing out his rage.

Madman. Coward. Bully. The old woman was calling him names. And the other things she was saying ... all in a voice so reasonable. If you didn’t know better, you’d think she was right. A whole city full of people who would believe this woman. He hated it.

And he knew what would make him feel better. In the old days, they believed that bloodletting was a curative, allowed evil spirits to escape from the body, relieved the pressure building up inside. They were almost right, he reflected. Cutting was a curative, so long as he could cut into someone else. Even in memory he could feel the resistance of flesh to the knife, the grab meat made on steel. Feel rage oozing out of him with the fall of blood; feed on the fear and disorientation in the eyes of the Other. Stray cat, neighborhood dog, half-blind old man. It was always the same.

Old woman. *Siobhan Sealy.*

From Hell’s Kitchen.

If he hurried, he could get there before her and be waiting.

The cab driver was an idiot. It wasn't a matter of not speaking English, or of not hearing clearly. He'd repeated Karen's instructions in an accent that was pure Brooklyn. He'd repeated them word for word. And then, instead of stopping at 52nd and 10th, as Karen requested, he overshot 10th and stopped on the corner of 9th Avenue. Going back would have meant going around the block again, and Siobhan wouldn't have that.

"No, love, you've saved me a walk, you brought me almost to my door, and you must be nearly as tired as I am. It's one block, and I'm home. I think I can get there safe enough."

"I don't like it," Karen said. "You said yourself, travel in pairs or—"

"Karen, you're a darling, but I'm too tired to argue about it. The cab's headed in the wrong direction for me. Go home. I'll be fine. It's one block! What could happen?"

Plenty, Karen thought. But Siobhan was not listening to her. She was out of the cab, walking briskly down the street. Karen made the cab driver wait so that she could watch the older woman until she disappeared into the darkness. Then, reluctantly, she told him to take her home.

Siobhan Sealy did not believe in giving in to weakness or to bullies. When she was a child in South Boston, her father had told her again and again, "Every time you let a bully have his way, even if it's just to stand aside when he wants to pass, you confirm his belief that he can have whatever he wants. Doesn't matter who he is—black, white, Beacon Hill or Southie—give in to a bully once and it'll be that much harder to stand up to him the next time."

She could hear Da's voice—roughened by wind and the cigarettes he smoked constantly, with the rich, sweet lilt of

Kerry in it—across forty-five years. That was before the cigarettes killed him, and before Ma had remarried and brought her to New York. A long time to remember a lesson, but she still believed it. That was why the people at RenanTech made her so angry. It was probably also the reason she'd been so adamant about walking back from 9th Avenue on her own. This was her neighborhood, her home, and she would never let this Cutter scare her out of it.

But listening to the rhythmic clip of her heels on the pavement, looking at the blank faces of the tenement buildings she walked past, she felt very alone.

In five minutes, I'll be up in the flat, she reminded herself. I'll be laughing at myself for an hysterical fool, and brushing my teeth and falling into bed. When was the last time I was up this late? And Karen does this every night!

When she reached the corner of 10th Avenue, Siobhan released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Cross the street, two doors up, and she was home. There was no traffic to speak of on the avenue, but she waited for the light to change nonetheless—habit of a lifetime. The storefronts on the block were shuttered up with louvered steel barriers padlocked in place. Across the street, the building next to the homestead was boarded up, awaiting renovation as soon as the new homesteaders got their title and development funds from the city. The Cutter, Sealy noted with amusement, had done one good thing for the neighborhood: the parade of prostitutes had vanished from the streets. She suspected that was less for their own safety than because their clients wouldn't venture into this risky neighborhood. She didn't exactly miss the tired-eyed women in tight dresses and improbable wigs ... but it was so *quiet* now.

The light changed. She walked across the street, listening as the sound of her heels on the asphalt echoed off the buildings. When she got to the other side of the

street she made herself walk slowly—stubbornly, no scurrying, no bustling. Almost home.

The plywood door of the abandoned building next to her own slammed open, and a man came out of the shadows. He was all in black—pants and tight-fitting sweater, gloves and boots, and a mask, or a hat rolled down over his face.

For a giddy moment, she thought, *In this weather? He must be so hot!*

Then she saw the knife in his right hand, black hilt, black blade that shone in the pink light of the street lamp with the gleam of pure malice.

“Oh, dear God!” she whispered. She made it to the steps of her house before he caught her.

She thrashed wildly, but the Cutter was a huge man and Siobhan Sealy was a small woman, wiry but slight. He squeezed his hand over her mouth with a force that broke her jaw and dragged her through the plywood door of the building next door, all the while whispering something to her. What was it? She tried, through the haze of pain and terror, to understand what he was saying, but it was hard to concentrate.

The building was little more than a brick shell filled with debris, the plaster walls long gone. Shreds of lathe and wiring hung down like tropical vines from the ceiling casting eerie, dangerous shadows in the light from the street. Construction garbage was littered all over the place, nails and wire mesh, animal waste, fast food paperware skirled into the building by the June breeze.

This is where I'm going to die, she thought.

He threw her against the wall. The impact knocked the breath out of her, and the sharp, piercing pain when she gasped for breath told her she'd broken ribs.

Before she could move, the big man was beside her, pinning her to the ground with his left hand on her sternum. The pain when she tried to breathe was unbelievable. She looked up—hard to focus in the dark,

through the pain. She saw the Cutter's eyes, pale and glittering in the light from the street.

I have to remember every detail, she told herself. If I live, I'll tell someone his eyes are blue. If I live.

He held the knife close to her face, letting her see it, distracting her from his own masked face.

"You have great bone structure," he said to her, and the knife bit deeply.



CHAPTER SEVEN

At 2:17 A.M., Daredevil was perched on the roof of a tenement building on 9th Avenue and 47th Street, looking out over the city. Another clear night, with the air soft and warm against his face. Low humidity, a slight breeze; the people in the apartments below him wouldn't be tossing because of the heat.

But they might be awake, thinking of the Cutter. They might be asleep, in the grip of nightmares.

Daredevil had patrolled Hell's Kitchen from nightfall on, watching for the big man in black. So far there had been no sign of him. Which was good—no one else threatened with harm. But if the Cutter didn't show, Daredevil could not take him down, and he wanted very, very badly to do that. It was disturbing how much he wanted it.

Though Matthew Murdock's father, Jack, had been a boxer, his dearest wish had been that Matthew use his brains, not his fists, to get through life. Even after his father's death, Matthew had found a way to honor that wish—by putting on a mask and letting "Daredevil" do the fighting Matthew had promised to avoid. But even when he wore the costume, even when he fought, Jack Murdock's shade was whispering in his ear, urging him to use his wits first and force second. When it came to force, and it almost always did, he tried to use as little as necessary, no matter how vile, how evil his opponent was. Always, there was Battlin' Jack Murdock saying "My boy will use his brains, not his fists!" Always, the lawyer in him, the man who believed that the system could and should work for everyone, rebelled against the idea of becoming judge and jury himself. A few times, when people he loved had been threatened, keeping that control had been a very near thing; he'd almost lost it. But he knew that the day he lost that control was the day he would become what he fought. So far, by hook or crook, Matt Murdock and Daredevil had stayed on the side of the angels.

But when he thought of Lucie Arvalho, and of Hassan Denges facedown on 11th Avenue in a pool of his own blood, it was hard not to imagine—pleasurably—the impact of his fist square in the big man’s face, or the meaty thud of foot against flesh.

My job isn’t to punish, he reminded himself. But, where the hell is he?

There was very little foot traffic tonight. He’d noted, with approval, that earlier in the evening teams of residents had been escorting people off the buses, that people were walking in teams, that everyone was working to stay alert. The hookers and three-card-monty boys had taken their business to other streets, and even the usual suspects, the gang boys and thugs who returned and returned to Hell’s Kitchen despite Daredevil’s watching presence, were unusually well behaved, and turned in early. Again tonight when he’d looked in at the mission at St. Bridget’s, he’d found it unusually crowded for this time of year—despite the beautiful weather, the city’s homeless did not want to be out where the Cutter could find them.

He was almost ready to pack it in for the night. It was late, Karen would have finished her show and gone home by now, and he was always aware that he didn’t spend as much time with her as either of them wanted. But the Cutter had hit two nights running, and Daredevil had an insistent hunch that he would strike again tonight.

Then his hypersenses picked up something: the loud, flat impact of wood against brick, about four blocks north and a little west. Then ... no screams, but the small, panicky sounds of a woman struggling. The rag doll sound of a body hitting a wall—a sound he knew too well not to recognize. A man’s voice, low-pitched and threatening. The Cutter’s voice.

He was in motion faster than he could have formed the words, leaping across the alley that separated the roof he was on from the one next door, then throwing out a line to

swing to a fire escape across the street, and up again, and running, clear to 10th Avenue in under forty seconds. He swung down from the rooftop to the street, gaining nearly a full block in that one simple, dangerous movement, then ran. Three blocks up. Then two. Then one, across the street. He could feel them, inside the boarded up building, the woman on the floor, her heart beating hard and fast. She was being held down, but—

Daredevil swore.

He was getting two heartbeats. The same exact heartbeats, from different positions. He'd been certain, a moment before, that the woman had been pinned to the ground with the big man kneeling over her, wielding that knife. Now he wasn't certain. He knew there were two people, one knife—but what he was hearing didn't make any sense. What he was sensing—the body heat and the sweat—told him there was only one person, the woman, and one knife. He was almost certain he knew which of the struggling forms inside the room was the woman's. But not absolutely certain. And with that knife in the equation, he could not afford to be wrong.

He stopped in the doorway. Trying to read things. Hoping to draw the Cutter's attention.

The big man's voice drawled, "Well, look. The neighborhood avenger. Come on, hornhead, you wanna play?"

Daredevil could sense the knife weaving before him, but he had only a weird, doubled-up doppleresque sense of the man holding the knife. Big—from the locus of his breathing, he estimated the man was three or four inches taller than his own 6'4"—and powerful, which he knew from their first encounter. But his heartbeat seemed to be that of the woman who was curled on the floor. Daredevil shook his head. Again, he had the feeling his senses were playing tricks on him. He couldn't tell reliably where the big man's hands were—the radial pulse at his wrist was synchronized

to his cardiac pulse, without the normal milliseconds delay. What was happening to his hypersenses?

But Daredevil could not stop to worry about it: he needed all his focus to locate the Cutter, make sure he wasn't confusing him with the victim.

The knife slashed across the space between them. To Daredevil's sluggish senses, the digital and cardiac pulses suddenly separated, but the man's arm lagged a good three seconds behind the knife. The sweeping kick Daredevil aimed at the knife connected with nothing, and he was forced off balance, into a 360 degree pivot.

Can't aim for flesh, he reminded himself. Connect with the knife, disarm him. Then you can take him out.

He could sense the cold steel of the knife, coming from low and to his right. Felt like the Cutter was going to slash low to high. Daredevil brought his left foot up, sweeping it across the knife's path. His boot made impact with the hilt and sent the knife flying, clattering against the street-side brick wall. Good enough: the Cutter was disarmed.

The big man grunted.

Did that sting? Daredevil thought. *Good.*

The big man stepped back, away. At least, Daredevil thought so from the dusty crunch of rubble under the Cutter's boot sole. As he stepped away, there were subtle differences in the heartbeat he broadcast—it didn't sound so much like that of the woman on the ground. She was alive, Daredevil knew. Had lost some blood, but wasn't in danger from it yet. The danger came from the big man. Daredevil realized with chagrin that in disarming the man he'd taken away the one reliable thing he could track: the cold steel of the knife.

Daredevil concentrated for a moment, reaching out with his radar sense, finding himself in relation to everything else in the room: the woman, the walls, the stanchions and tumbledown stairway, the door. Everything but the Cutter. He listened for a heartbeat, trying to find a smell, a trace of

heat. The big man was moving around to the left, trying to get to the knife.

Daredevil launched himself in a flying leap at the Cutter, aimed this time at a place slightly to the left of where he sensed the big man to be. He connected, shoulder to solar-plexus, and heard the big man grunt. But the impact was wrong, he'd hit—what? Kevlar? The Cutter had body armor under the black knit sweater he wore. The Cutter was already on his feet again, breathing loudly and raggedly, starting toward the front of the building where the knife had landed.

Daredevil strained to get an exact fix on the Cutter's location, but at that moment a chorus of voices started from the street: "What's going on?" "My God, it's Siobhan!" "My God, it's him!"

"Stay back!" Daredevil called. The last thing he needed was for the Cutter to take a hostage from among the bystanders. "Call the cops and stay back!"

The Cutter laughed, and Daredevil got a fix on him from the sound. Still edging toward the door and the knife. The crowd—he could read their heartbeats, why not the Cutter's?—was still clustered around the door. He had to stop the Cutter before he got to the knife, or the people. He grabbed a beam that stood propped against a load-bearing support and swept it with enormous force, just at knee level. When it hit the Cutter, Daredevil felt the impact all the way up his own arm.

The big man grunted, did not fall.

What is this guy made of? That blow should have broken his femur, maybe his kneecap too. Is he armored all over?

Then, frighteningly, Daredevil lost track of the Cutter. No heartbeat, no heat signature, no breathing. The whole world seemed frozen in time. Daredevil reached out with his hypersenses, found and eliminated the woman on the floor—her pulse threadier now; she was nearing shock—and the people in front of the building, but no Cutter.

The big man exhaled. *Above* the doorway to the street. He'd used a broken sandstone column and a hole in the wall as footholds, and was perched on the limestone lintel above the door. Almost as Daredevil realized it, the Cutter had leapt off the lintel at him. The big man was not a trained fighter; his movement had none of the precise, graceful economy of motion that Daredevil, with his years of martial arts training, had as second nature. The Cutter jumped with the clear intention of landing on his opponent and smashing him flat.

Daredevil spun right in a low crouch, just out of the way. Came up poised to fight—and the Cutter was right on top of him. The big man opened his arms as if to embrace the crime fighter, but Daredevil ducked out of his grasp and threw the Cutter over his hip. He landed heavily—Daredevil felt the impact through his boots—and rolled awkwardly up again.

"Isn't as much fun when you're picking on someone your own size, is it?" he asked.

The Cutter growled, feinted left, then backed up the few feet to where the woman lay.

"Spread the word, sweetheart," he told her.

Daredevil froze, waiting to see what the Cutter was going to do next; he was too close to the woman, and his hypersenses were dopplering on him again. They showed more than two heartbeats—no, it was one, then two again. Then Daredevil felt the man move left, toward the door. He was fast.

So many heartbeats.

As the Cutter darted toward the door, the people who had been watching scattered back, shrieking. For a few long, disorienting seconds, Daredevil could not sort out one from the other, could not tell heartbeat from heartbeat, heard that weird doubling of sound. He thought the Cutter went right, outside the door, but someone to the left as he reached the street screamed that the Cutter was there,

near. The crowd closed around the man who had yelled, and in the cacophony of voices and heartbeats and physical impact sounds—

—the Cutter vanished.

Daredevil stood still for a moment, trying to catch anything, any trace of scent, of sound, of heat. Nothing. In a matter of seconds.

Someone was yelling. “Is Siobhan alive?”

The man in red turned back to the crowd. “She’s alive, but she’s hurt. I got there before he had a chance to do too much, but—” He did not need to finish.

With infinite care, her neighbors carried the woman out. She was middle-aged, slight, breathing shallowly. Her clothes were slashed, exposing her stomach and the white cotton brassiere, all spattered with her blood. She’d been marked: among the slashes on her face was a tic-tac-toe game. The Xs won. And on her belly, crudely inscribed in block letters, the word liar.

“Holy God,” someone murmured.

“Where’s the ambulance?” Daredevil asked.

A babble of voices rose up. “They said they were on the way.” “Any minute now.”

He listened, but heard no siren. Listened to the woman’s thready pulse, the shallow breathing. She hadn’t lost too much blood, but she wasn’t young, and the fear and the pain had done their work. She was in shock and needed help *now*.

“Get me a blanket,” he said to the crowd. A young Hispanic woman dashed into the building next door and was back in a moment with a thin polyester bedspread. It would have to do. He wrapped the woman in the blanket and was about to pick her up and take her to St. Clare’s Hospital himself when the thin wail of an ambulance siren pierced the night.

He put the woman down again. “What’s your name?” he murmured to her.

“Siobhan ... Sealy,” she mumbled in a hoarse whisper. It was evident the Cutter had broken her jaw. “I couldn’t ... fight him ...” There were tears in her eyes.

He did not want this woman to use her strength blaming herself for the attack. “If you’d fought him, he’d have crushed you. You stayed alive. You did the right thing.”

“Bullies ...” she muttered. “Never give in to ... bullies.”

He stroked her hair. Around them, Siobhan Sealy’s neighbors watched respectfully, as if reluctant to break into his moment with her.

“You didn’t give in,” he told her. “You were very brave. I don’t want to push you Ms. Sealy, but ... was there anything about him, did he say anything—?”

She closed her eyes. He knew she had not fainted, but thought maybe the question was too hard for her to answer.

“His eyes were blue,” she said at last. “And he said I had to give the neighborhood a message. To get out. Take over ... some other slum ... get out, get out. Or he’d kill us off one ... by one.” She shuddered.

The ambulance was drawing up to the curb. Daredevil heard a police car bearing down, and another behind it. Time to go.

“You’ll be okay. You did good, remember that. You stayed alive.” He looked around, found the woman who’d brought the blanket. “Can you go with her to the hospital?”

“I will,” three other people volunteered. Good. The woman had friends.

He turned to go.

“Yo, Daredevil! Thanks!” someone called out. There was a murmured chorus of thanks.

He waved his hand in acknowledgment. The cup is half full; the cup is half empty. Siobhan Sealy’s neighbors were grateful because he’d saved their friend and driven off the Cutter. He was bitterly disappointed because he’d let the man get away—again.

He swung up a fire escape and began a rapid ascent to the rooftop. By the time the first police car arrived, he was on the roof, heading north.

He kept up the patrol until near dawn, searching in all the places he could imagine that someone could hide. He broke up a burglary, stopped a drunk from cutting up another drunk with a broken bottle, stood and watched while a dozen would-be gang kids broke up a fight. Clearly not everyone was staying off the street because of the Cutter. But what he was able to do felt like Band-Aids on a gaping wound. He checked out the warehouses between 11th and the West Side Highway; the back rooms of the bars along 9th; the shadowy jungle of DeWitt Clinton Park where the dealers usually lurked; he hit every dark cranny Hell's Kitchen provided.

Nothing. It was all made harder by the fact that he couldn't be certain that any scent or heartbeat he picked up was—or wasn't—the Cutter.

He couldn't pick the man out of a crowd. Was it something about the Cutter, or something going haywire with his hypersense? The thought occurred to him as he swung across 10th Avenue in a deep, exhilarating arc: *What if I couldn't do this? What if today I can't identify one person, maybe two—and next week I can't navigate down the hall without someone holding my elbow?*

What if, for the second time in my life, I'm going blind?

Karen woke up when he got in. "Hey," she murmured sleepily. "Decided to come home after all?"

She propped herself up on one elbow and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. Matt had come in the window and slumped into the arm chair in the corner of the room, peeling the mask off his face and running a hand through his dark red hair. It was plastered, flat and lifeless, against his skull—the ultimate hat hair. Matt's eyes—usually

focused, despite his blindness— were flat and lifeless tonight.

Oh my, Karen thought. *Really bad night.*

“What time is it?” she asked, sitting up. Then answered her own question. “Five forty-two. Another sleepless night, huh?”

He nodded.

She slid out of bed and padded across the room to settle on one arm of the armchair. “Can you tell me what’s up?” she asked gently.

He turned his face to her, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, and sighed. “I don’t deserve you,” he said.

She nodded. “Of course you don’t. But you roll in here looking like someone shot your dog, so I figure I can be self-absorbed and ill-tempered some other morning.”

His shoulders shook. He *almost* smiled.

“So what gives?”

“It’ll be on the radio in the morning, anyway,” he said. “The Cutter. I stopped him before he killed anyone, but he cut this woman up pretty badly—right in front of Louis Bastuto’s building, as a matter of fact—and I couldn’t get ahold of him.”

Karen realized she was holding her breath. “Who was the woman?” she asked.

“Her name’s Sealy, Siobhan—”

Now it was Karen’s turn to slump down. “Oh, my God. Oh, God, how badly was she hurt?”

Matt explained how Sealy had been hurt. Tears were rolling down Karen’s cheeks when he was finished.

“It’s my fault,” she moaned. “If I’d made the cab driver go around the block ... I knew it was a mistake, oh my God ...”

Matt put an arm up and pulled Karen down onto his lap, letting her weep on his shoulder. Finally, when she was calmer, he asked her what she was crying about. Then it

was Karen's turn to explain to him: about the residents' coalition meeting the night before, and the radio interview, and the cab driver who had screwed up and delivered them a block away from Sealy's house. About letting Sealy walk that last block home.

"If I'd just insisted we go around the block—she was so sure she'd be all right ..." She took a deep, horrified breath as another thought occurred to her. "Matt, could doing the show have made her more of a target?"

She watched him think about it, watched him consider, then discard the easy answer. For good or bad, Matt would never sugarcoat things for her. "At first I was going to say no, his targets have appeared to be entirely random. But ... did you talk about the Cutter at all on the show?"

Karen nodded. "Just a little. Someone called to ask what they were doing. She called him a madman and a bully and said when the neighborhood was united, he could never win against them. My God, it must have been like waving a red flag at him."

Matt whistled. Karen slumped into his arms, miserable.

"Listen, sweetheart," he said. "Whatever you did, it's not your fault. If anyone's to blame, it's me. I should have taken this guy the other night. I should for sure have taken him out tonight. But I can't seem to get a fix on him."

"What kind of fix?" she asked.

Haltingly, Matt began to explain how hard it had been to focus on the Cutter's movements, the feeling he had that his senses were slowly unraveling, fraying away. She heard the fear that underlay his voice, and decided to be rigorously logical. Sympathy wouldn't help, but reason might.

"Is it only with this guy? Could it be something about him?"

Matt shrugged. "Could be, but it shifts and changes. Sometimes he's there and sometimes he's not."

"Does it happen with anyone else?" she asked.

Matt hesitated. "I don't think—no, maybe it has. Today, this morning, I had a meeting with the CEO at RenanTech. And I felt very disoriented, talking with her." He seemed uncomfortable.

"Disoriented how?" Karen prodded.

"She's one of the most arrogant, self-serving, insincere women I've ever met." He grinned for a moment. "She makes Rosalind seem like Mother Teresa."

Karen laughed. "Okay, I think I follow that. So what was so disorienting?"

"Maybe it was pheromones," Matt said thoughtfully. "Maybe my hypersenses were overreacting to something. I was—" He stopped. Started again. "I have not had that strong a ... *physical* ... reaction to a woman since I was thirteen. *Physically*, she made me feel like running in circles and baying at the moon. Mentally, I wanted to pitch her out the window."

"*Physically*, Matt?" Karen asked.

"You know the old silent movie image of the femme fatale: men fall over themselves, commit hideous crimes, sell their honor and their stock portfolio for a woman? That was the effect she had on me. *Physically*," he emphasized. "It was disturbing. Now I'm wondering if it's not likely that she's perfectly normal, and it's just another instance in which my hypersenses are going crazy."

Karen sighed, tabling the matter of the RenanTech CEO. "Presuming your hypersenses are going a little weird, is there anything that could have caused it?"

"Maybe that blow to the head I took the other night?" he suggested without conviction.

Karen traced the facing bruise that ran from his cheek to his temple. "After all the other times you've been hit on the head? Honey, unless concussions have a cumulative effect on your hypersenses, I don't think that could be it."

"I don't know. Maybe the paint fumes in the office?"

This time Karen laughed, nuzzling his neck. “Since Foggy’s the one who’s been in the office most, that would mean that he’s going to start running around in red tights next. I love Foggy, Matt, but he tried that once before, and the memory of it is a little more than I want to deal with at this hour of the morning.”

He laughed, then turned his head and kissed her. They sat that way for a long time, resting together, enjoying the closeness, both a little too tired to do anything about it. Matt dozed, and Karen sat in his arms, thinking. He was worrying too much, she was sure. But *what if* the effects of the accident all those years ago that had taken his sight and given him his extraordinary powers—what if it was wearing off?

What if Matt, who prized his independence and had a deep need to defend and protect the people of his little fiefdom, his neighborhood, Hell’s Kitchen—what if after all these years he was to find himself blind indeed? Karen had a brief thought that Daredevil would never be her rival again. Then she considered how it would affect Matt, to be unable to help, to be trapped in a truly sightless body. As sunlight broke over the windowsill and the warmth of a new June day began to take hold, Karen Page shivered.



Rosalind Sharpe was breakfasting with the enemy.

The cup she held was very fine, very delicate porcelain; slender bands of royal blue and 24-carat gold circled the rim, pretty but not too pretty for a man's office. The teapot, plates, saucers and the rest of the service were of the same china, and the linen napkins, which had been furled in china napkin rings, were embroidered with the same pattern. The silver basket on the tray held croissants and scones—nothing so *declass  * as a bagel. The tea was Formosa Oolong, smoky and sophisticated. Bernard Quayle had taught her to drink Formosa Oolong years ago; it still tasted of success and intrigue to her.

"Bernard, you must have had this china service for twenty-five years. Have you never broken a cup?" Rosalind tapped a manicured nail against the rim of her cup, pleased by the musical sound.

Bernard Quayle smiled. "My granddaughter alone has broken five or six cups; Arthur chipped one, once, as did an Indonesian futures broker; and my last secretary broke one." His tone was the pleasant tone of reminiscence. Still, Rosalind reflected that she would not have wanted to be that secretary, or anyone else who damaged something Bernard Quayle regarded as his own. "Accidents happen. When we bought the china, I made sure we purchased several dozen cups and saucers."

Rosalind eyed the cup. Spode. Very expensive. Several *dozen* cups and saucers probably translated into several thousand dollars' worth of china. Just to make sure he had a spare set when needed; very like Bernard.

"This is tremendously pleasant, Rosalind; I'm glad you called. I don't see you as much as I should like. And I must admit, I've never been able to fathom your leap into criminal law—that surely isn't where the money is, unless all your clients are mobsters?" He paused politely.

Rosalind laughed. Bernard could be intimidating, but he could also be a hell of a lot of fun. "Actually, it's *stimulating*, Bernard. Keeps me on my toes. I never had your gift for

making numbers jump through hoops, but criminal law—there's power, and sometimes a spot of glory to go along with it, and yes, most of our clients *do* pay. I only wish we had more mobsters, as you call them. They may be reprehensible, but they offset my partners' regrettable penchant for *pro bono* work. Which brings me, I suppose, to one of the reasons I called."

Bernard Quayle leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea. Half of an orange scone remained on his plate, the silver knife lay crosswise next to it, and his embroidered napkin had been neatly folded. *Meticulous as always*, Rosalind thought.

"You're losing me, Rosie," Quayle chided. No other living human being called Rosalind Sharpe Rosie, but Bernard Quayle had, long ago. The nickname brought back memories, some of them very pleasant indeed, that Rosalind could not afford to indulge yet. Not until she'd done the business she had come for.

"We've taken on a client—more like a charity case, but he was referred to one of my partners by a friend he holds *sacred*—" Rosalind rolled her eyes. "Anyway, the man lives in Hell's Kitchen, and apparently had a nasty run-in with an employee at a company Q-P owns, Renan—"

"Tech," Bernard Quayle finished. "I can't imagine what sort of problem any one of the local residents could have with RenanTech. It's a medical research company, no interaction with the community to speak of. What was it, an argument over a parking space? Someone cut in line at the local deli? I'll send a memo."

"It's rather more serious than that, Bernard." She had forgotten his tendency to reduce other people, inferiors socially or professionally, to snatches of anecdote. A trick of people with power; she probably did it herself.

"More serious? Is your client bringing suit against RenanTech for some dereliction by an employee?"

Rosalind blinked. *There's a strategy I never thought of: have Louis Bastuto bring suit against RenanTech for ... something ... and let them offer to drop the charges against him in exchange for terminating the suit.*

For a moment, a nanosecond, really, it seemed like a good idea. Then she discarded it. Threatening a suit would only make Bernard Quayle come on harder, which was the last thing Louis Bastuto, and Sharpe, Nelson and Murdock, needed.

"Bringing a suit? Good lord, no." Rosalind laughed again, then pitched her voice a little lower, confidently. "Frankly, it sounds like stupidity all around. According to my client, he went to RenanTech to talk to the community relations officer, and there was some sort of argument, everyone overreacting—and the next thing you know, Mr. Bastuto was being arrested on trespass and assault charges."

Quayle leaned forward and poured more tea into Rosalind's cup, then into his own. He sat back in his chair again, exuding a sense of stillness, a sort of Zen quiet. Had Rosalind not seen this performance many times during the two years she had worked with Bernard Quayle—the gentle elder statesman gathering his thoughts—she might have been impressed, or unnerved. As it was, she was certain he had already made up his mind and was simply using time for effect.

"Rosie, it's a good jump from a chat with the community relations office to assault. Do you know who your client spoke to, or *why* he wanted to talk to someone?"

Rosalind sighed. Most legal cases, criminal or civil, came down to *he said*s: one says *I saw him do it*, the other, *I was nowhere near the place*. Her job was always to make her client's *he said* the most believable. She'd never met Louis Bastuto, had no reason other than Matt's say-so to believe him herself, so how was she to make his story credible?

"He says he was the representative of a neighborhood group that is concerned about RenanTech's expansion plans for the area. The person he spoke to, by the way, was a—" She leaned forward and flipped open the slim leather-bound notebook that lay on the desk next to her cell phone. "A David Wachtel. My partner spoke to Mr. Wachtel a couple of days ago and said he was notably unhelpful."

Quayle nodded. "Ah. David Wachtel. Yes, I see. Actually, he's their head of security. Not, perhaps, the first man I would have assigned to deal with a community member with delusions of corporate menace." He sighed. "Listen, Rosie: I'll call over to RenanTech and straighten this out for you—did I mention my granddaughter is in charge there? The acquisition was her idea, and I think it's going to bear some very nice fruit indeed, one way or another. But I want something from you."

Now it was Rosalind Sharpe's turn to play cool. She raised one eyebrow, took a sip of her tea, deliberately set the cup back in the saucer before answering. "And what would that be, Bernie?"

Quayle laughed, a gentle chuckle. "I've got tickets for *Turandot* tonight at the Met. Will you be my guest?"

Rosalind smiled, but wondered if she was getting off too easily. "I think I can do that."

"Well!" Bernard Quayle reached for the sleek phone on his desk—mahogany, and brand new, Rosalind thought. Very expensive—was mahogany one of the endangered trees? It certainly made a beautiful desk. "Mrs. Bodmin, would you put me through to Miss Belinda?"

Miss Belinda, like the daughter of the plantation, Rosalind thought. *I suppose that's what she is.*

Bernard frowned at the phone. "Blasted voice-mail," he murmured. The tinny sound of the voice-mail message was half audible to Rosalind. Then Quayle said pleasantly, "Belinda, this is Bernard. Would you call me, please? It's about a problem David apparently had with a—" He

paused, and read the name off the notepad Rosalind had pushed across the table. "A Louis Bastuto. Talk to you shortly."

He smiled at Rosalind. "There. Done. Now, where shall I pick you up?"

"My apartment?" She gave him the address. "Let me call my partner and let him know he can stop worrying about this Bastuto case and get back to paying clients." She flipped her cellphone open and pressed the auto-dial for Matt's cellphone. He did not pick up, and the voice-mail message kicked in.

"Matthew? Rosalind. I'm at Quayle-Partido, and I think Bernard Quayle and I have worked out a way to make this whole Louis Bastuto thing go away. So don't worry about it anymore. More importantly, don't spend time on it that you could be spending on people who pay by the hour. Bye."

She turned back to Bernard Quayle. "Voice-mail. Curse or blessing?"

The older man smiled. "I find I'm old-fashioned enough to prefer talking to a live human being," he said.

"Old-fashioned," Rosalind told him, as she rose and slipped her pad and cellphone into her bag, "is the last word I would apply to you, Bernard."

He rose to escort her to the door. *Well, maybe old-fashioned in the right ways*, she thought. Bernard might be a senior citizen by Social Security's reckoning, but he was still a very attractive man. With the aura of power that surrounded him, he could be near irresistible.

"I can't tell you how much I look forward to this evening, Rosie. Seven o'clock, then?"

"Seven o'clock." She left smiling.

Matt had fallen asleep in the chair again after the alarm went off, and when his cellphone rang it roused him only enough to implant a dim impression that he had missed a phone call somewhere, some time. When the fall-back

alarm went off the next time, however, Karen came in from the kitchen and woke him with a kiss.

"Hey, counselor. Time to get up. You have places to go and things to do, yes?"

"Mmmghhfff," he said. She smelled of shampoo and cologne; there was bacon cooking somewhere, and coffee. All of which were very good reasons to get out of the chair and wake up.

He showered and dressed, humming as he did so, that same tune he'd been humming for days. Karen came in long enough to approve of his shirt and veto the tie in favor of another, then dropped a kiss on his chin and went back to the bacon. Matt took up his pen, wallet, and keys. When he slipped his cellphone into his pocket, it vibrated slightly in his hand: the noiseless "message waiting" alarm.

Already? he thought, and picked up the message.

"Matthew?" Rosalind Sharpe's recorded voice purred into his ear. It was too early to talk to Rosalind, he thought. "Bernard Quayle and I have worked out a way to make this whole Louis Bastuto thing go away. So don't worry about it anymore."

"Rosalind!" He said the name like a curse. Why couldn't she give him the really useful information? Like what sort of "way" she and Bernard Quayle had worked out to resolve Louis Bastuto's problems. And how she talked Quayle into it in the first place? And what, if anything, it would cost Louis Bastuto?

Gratefully drinking a first cup of coffee, Matt reflected that he felt let down by Rosalind's message. He didn't want to forget about the Bastuto case, because he'd begun to feel there was some connection between Louis Bastuto's troubles and the turmoil in Hell's Kitchen. Maybe even a connection to the Cutter. Nothing overt, certainly nothing he could prove yet, but ... the woman who had been attacked last night was Bastuto's neighbor. Another mover and shaker in the neighborhood campaign to find out what

RenanTech's true intentions toward the neighborhood were. True, Karen said that the woman had said some incendiary things about the Cutter on her show. But the Sealy woman had also told him the Cutter had said to give the neighborhood a message: get out. Had Louis Bastuto's experience at RenanTech been a more civilized way of sending the same message?

And was there any real connection?

He sighed, thumbed the face plate off his watch and checked the time: 10:07. He had no meetings scheduled today, and if he didn't put in an appearance at the office Foggy would probably explode. He would have to go in, for the sake of office morale if nothing else. And who knew: maybe they'd have finished painting his office. Maybe they'd have finished painting *someone's* office. Stranger things had happened.

The painters were working in his office when he got there; Julie Haupt jumped out of her seat when she saw him and steered him protectively away. "I know the paint fumes get to you," she said. "They're working on the third wall. They seemed to think they'd make real headway today."

"Lies. All lies." Foggy Nelson leaned against the wall studying the cup of coffee in his hand morosely. "I don't think they're ever leaving. I think they *like* it here. It's air conditioned, the coffee's free, they get to point and laugh at the poor people trying to *work* ..."

Matt took his partner's arm. "Conference room?" he mouthed to Julie over his shoulder.

"Empty," she told him.

"Come on, Foggy. Let's go hide from the painters."

Julie called after him. "No, wait, Matt! There's a ton of messages! Teresa Nielsen called about the Hayden deposition, and the lawyer for Lisa Michael from Clint, Dylan and Bell, and an ADA—which one, which one ...

Melissa Chin, and Ben Urich called and said he had more information about *something* and ...”

Matt sighed. “All this morning?”

“All this morning,” Julie agreed, in the tone of someone expecting him to do the right thing.

He sighed again. “Let me have five minutes to get a cup of coffee, then I’ll start returning calls, okay? I promise.” As he and Foggy headed down the hall, Matt described Rosalind’s message from that morning.

“She didn’t give any details? Have you spoken to her?”

“Left a message on her voice-mail. I want to know what the deal is before I stop work on Bastuto’s case. It’s weird. I’m beginning to wonder if there’s a connection to ... some other stuff that’s going on.”

“Some other stuff that’s ... Oh.” Foggy broke off. He shook his head, as if shifting gears to consider Matt Murdock’s double life as Daredevil. “You must tell me all about it some time.”

Matt grinned. “You’re first on the list, Foggy.” Foggy pushed open the door to the conference room—only one wall painted, so far—and they were greeted by the buzz of the phone. “Julie’s tracked me down.”

He handled the first several calls quickly, then asked Julie to get Melissa Chin on the phone.

“Yes, Chin here.” The high, girlish voice warred with the tone of brisk authority.

“Melissa, Matthew Murdock returning your call.”

The ADA went through some preliminaries, suggested that a plea might be acceptable from Chris Gomez, his client from the White Castle robbery. Matt promised to talk to his client, then asked about Louis Bastuto.

“Oh, him.” Chin sighed gustily. “I talked to the receptionist, and she swears your boy had the bat with him when he came in. Frankly, I’m not sure I believe her—she was as nervous as a Chinatown cat on New Year’s, but some people do get terrified when they’re deposed. The girl

is clearly not the crispiest cracker in the barrel. And the people at RenanTech don't seem to be interested in budging on the charges; as a matter of fact, the guy I spoke to—Wachtel, the complainant—said they want a criminal verdict to bolster their civil suit for damages. In other words, we're at the same place we were when we talked the other day."

"I still think something is way off on this one, Melissa. Thanks for the info; I'll be in touch." Matt hung up the phone. Suing Louis Bastuto for damages? He shook his head and dialed the number for Ben Urich's direct line. He was mildly astonished to find Urich at his desk, for the second time in two days.

"I was waiting for you to call. What's your schedule look like today, Matt?" As always, Urich's growly bass was dry and noncommittal. Still, Matt heard an underlying tone that alerted him. Ben had found something.

"Nothing more than crushing piles of legal work. The usual. What's up?"

"You want to make time to meet with one of the founders of RenanTech? From whom Quayle-Partido acquired the company? Might give you a better sense of what you're up against."

"I always like to know what I'm up against," Matt agreed.

Ben met Matt at the door of Golden's Delicatessen on Houston Street. It was an old-fashioned place that made old-fashioned-ness its shtick: there was sawdust on the floor, the waiters were abrupt and distracted, and the air was thick with the smells of spice and garlic, brine and meat, the rich, yeasty scent of bread. Ben had taken a table in the back, a rickety plastic oblong edged with aluminum, probably older than Matt himself. At the table, a youngish man was working his way through an overstuffed pastrami on whole wheat. He was tall and thin, with glasses that

were too large to be in fashion, and close-cropped hair that would require no particular care. He wore a button-down shirt and chinos, and gave Matt the impression that he was not interested in appearance, his own or anyone else's.

"Matt, this is Gregg D'Orazio. Gregg, Matthew Murdock —"

"Who's got a client that's come up against the Quayles," the man finished. "Well, siddown. I don't know if I can tell you anything that'll help against the Barracuda and her grandpa, but if I can, it'd be my extreme pleasure."

"Okay, great. Can you start with exactly what RenanTech does?" Matt asked. "I haven't been able to get a complete answer. And then you can tell me about your experience with the Quayles."

D'Orazio took another enormous bite of his sandwich, chewed for a minute, nodded. Matt could sense the gesture just fine, but couldn't respond. He sat and waited until D'Orazio realized that a blind man wouldn't have seen his nod.

"Sorry," D'Orazio said, flustered. "I mean, that'll be fine. So. Once upon a time ..." As he spoke, he hunched forward, talking rapidly, pausing to take another bite from his sandwich, or a swig from the glass of seltzer at his elbow, then returning to the narrative. His voice was medium-pitched with a thready, reedy quality that made him sound far younger than he was.

It sounded like one of the success stories one might read in *Fortune* or *U.S. News*, or the *Daily Globe Sunday Magazine*. D'Orazio had gone to Harvard, then moved down the street to MIT, where he'd gotten a Ph.D. in genetics. He was still at MIT, in a post-doctoral program, when he'd met a couple of other gene-geniuses, as he called them: Carl Hauser and Lisa Chanicka. All of them were interested in genetic engineering, and Chanicka brought a background in electrical engineering and computers to the mix. She wanted to work with

nanotechnology. Carl, for reasons of his own, wanted to work on degenerative muscular diseases.

"And you?" Matt asked.

He could read D'Orazio's grin from across the table. It was the first time the scientist had shown any real emotion. "I wanted to *play*. Get a really tough problem and come up with an elegant solution. Starting RenanTech was sort of like building our own high-tech sandbox so we could play the way we wanted to, all the time.

"Of course," he went on, and the note of pleasure went out of his voice, "it wasn't that simple. We had to find venture capital, funding, cut corners, mortgage our lives. Carl got divorced, Lisa broke up with her boyfriend, my wife and I... made it through, but just barely. But in the end, after two years planning, we had the company and we were able to really start tailoring the nanotech."

"Tailoring it to what?" Matt asked. Somewhere along the line Ulrich had hailed a waiter and quietly ordered sandwiches, and was working his way through tongue-on-rye with mustard, while Matt toyed with corned beef and tried to imagine how all this could be connected to Louis Bastuto's case.

D'Orazio made a *tsskking* sound between his teeth. "You know anything about science?"

Matt shook his head. "Not the way you mean science, anyway. You'll have to make this the 'For Dummies' version."

D'Orazio shrugged philosophically, sucked down more seltzer, and went on. "Carl wanted to go after Muscular Dystrophy. You know what that is?"

"Knocks out the muscles, doesn't it?" Ulrich asked.

"That's one way of putting it," D'Orazio agreed. "In MD, there's a progressive degeneration of muscle fibers. In some kinds, it's manageable. But the worst kind, Duchenne MD, is the most common form, and it's fatal. Period. It's

inherited, only hits males, and usually hits them young. Hauser lost two of his brothers to MD, and—”

“It was personal,” Matt breathed. Personal was something he understood.

“Man, was it. Carl didn’t talk about it much, but going after MD was his holy war. It was a hell of a puzzle; the cause of MD is still class-A unknown, and we didn’t get close to figuring it out ourselves. But we found we didn’t have to; we put together a nanobug, most beautiful little thing you ever saw, that acted as a—” D’Orazio paused, gesturing delicately with one hand, as if he could drag an image out of the air that way. “It acted as a coach, encouraging the fibers the MD was weakening to work out, eat right, take their vitamins ...” He grinned.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, it’s a metaphor. The nanobug delivers measured, very tiny electrical impulses to the muscles, which stimulates them—gives them a workout. And we were beginning to think it’d have other uses, too. Do you know how many autoimmune diseases there are in which the body attacks itself? Lupus, myasthenia gravis, MS—and we were hoping to work on using the nanotech to protect against autoimmune attack.”

“So why aren’t you guys up for the Nobel?” Urich asked. “You sound like it worked.”

“It did. It does. But do you have any idea how long it takes to bring a medical technology to market? *Really?* We were all set to go to the FDA for human trials—and then some side effects started showing up. The nanobug was targeted to muscle tissue, but it was affecting autonomic functions too. Weird metabolic stuff that was ... thematically the same, but different in each subject.”

“Thematically?”

“Look, I’m trying to explain this so you’ll understand.” D’Orazio pushed his glasses far down on his nose and looked at Matt and Urich over their rims. “In some of the

test subjects, metabolic rates would shoot up, in others they were suppressed. A couple of rats overproduced pheromones—became rat-Casanovas; females were literally tearing each other apart to get to the boys; we had to move their cages to another room. At least they were comic relief. With some of the other rats, the Bug hit hypothalamic function—there was uncontrolled rapid respiration, or blood pressure swings, or broad fluctuations in body temperature. Choose-your-own-side-effect wasn't something the FDA was going to be happy about."

"That must have been frustrating," Matt said. In the kitchen, someone dropped a load of dishes. There was a moment of appreciative silence in the dining room, then a spatter of mean-spirited applause. Matt repeated himself to get D'Orazio back on track. "Very frustrating."

"Heartbreaking. You expect setbacks, but we were so close! I mean, it worked—it just had this damned baggage with it. So we went back to the drawing board. But without a product to test, some of our investors got antsy, wanted their money out. We had to stop work on the Bug and go looking for more venture capital."

"Enter Quayle-Partido ..." Matt said softly.

"Yeah. They bought out the original investors—who weren't bad guys, just nervous. At first, we thought Q-P were the white knights. They were thrilled to be in the forefront of breaking medical technology and blah, blah." D'Orazio pushed the plate, with the ruins of his sandwich on it, away from him, as if he were pushing away Q-P and their promises. "For nearly a year, everything was fine. Then they started pushing. When would we be ready for trials? When could we go to the FDA? We'd told them up front, two, maybe three years before we could be sure the Bug was debugged. It was in the disclosures. They knew ..." D'Orazio's voice was whiny with incomprehension.

"But they got antsy?" Ben prodded.

“Belinda Quayle was all over us. She’d recommended that Q-P invest; it was her butt on the line, her reputation at stake. Lisa tried to explain to her that if we went to the FDA with a product that had hidden bombs, and they passed it because the bombs were so well hidden, and then the bombs blew up once the Bug was being used in treatment ... it wouldn’t do her reputation, or Q-P’s, or RenanTech’s any good at all. She wouldn’t hear it.”

Instead of listening to reason, it seemed, Belinda Quayle had forced a buyout. Within six months, the three partners had barely been involved in the day-to-day business of the company. It took less than a year to get them out, altogether.

“Out of your own company?” Ben asked, startled.

“We could have stayed if we wanted to labor in the mines like happy trolls, and to lie to the FDA when they asked us if the Bug was safe. As if that would have made a difference; they’d have discovered the problem sooner or later.” Around the three men the bustle of the restaurant went on: clatter of dishes and silver, voices calling out or claiming orders, chairs and tables scraping against the ancient linoleum floor, the mumble of conversation. Without his sandwich to hide behind, D’Orazio had started shredding paper napkins onto the table; Matt heard the soft sound of tearing paper as the soundtrack of D’Orazio’s bitterness.

“Carl wanted to fight it. It drove him nuts that Q-P not only had RenanTech, they had the Bug, too. He was—I don’t think he ever got over feeling guilty that the MD missed him. Both his little brothers got it, and both of them were dead before they turned 10. So he was carrying around the guilt, and all his parents’ expectations for *three* sons. I think it would have crushed me, but not Carl. He was determined to get RenanTech back, only we really didn’t have a clue how to do it. For the longest time we just stuck our heads in the sand and pretended that nothing was

changing; we were the gene-geniuses. I don't think we believed we could fight Q-P. But toward the end, Carl was seeing lawyers, accountants, putting up a fight."

"The end?"

"Carl died—car went over an embankment in New Jersey on his way to visit his mother. Carl ... drank a little." D'Orazio swept the shreds of paper around his plate into a pile. "After that, I don't know. The fight just went out of us. Q-P bought us out with enough to pay back the money we'd each borrowed personally, and have a nest egg left beside. Lisa got an offer from GenenTech, I got a teaching gig at Empire State, in the Med School. On the bright side, my marriage is in better shape." He didn't sound like it was much compensation.

Matt exhaled. The mood of depression at the table was palpable. Well, it was a depressing story. Quayle-Partido's treatment of RenanTech's founders didn't sound sensitive, but he hadn't heard anything exactly illegal. Unless Q-P was planning on forcing the nanotech through FDA testing with full knowledge that there were problems. And that brought him to another question.

"Why RenanTech?" he asked. "Did anyone, Belinda Quayle or anyone else, ever give you an idea why a conservative investment firm like Q-P would take a flyer on something as chancy as genetic research?"

D'Orazio shook his head, then apologized again for replying nonverbally. "Sorry, no. Frankly, we were all so relieved to be getting their help ... and we were all so focused on the good we could be doing for people. They probably said all the right things about that, too—service to humanity and that junk. Have you met Belinda Quayle? She can be very persuasive. At the start she was really, really hot for us, thought biotech was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard of. Then, like I said: she forgot everything we told her and just put the pressure on. And on and on."

The three men sat silently for a minute. Then D’Orazio seemed to shake himself loose of the spell his own words had woven.

“Well, I’m over it,” he said at last. “Grieved, moved on. Playing with some very interesting stuff at ESU. I have to say, though, it would be very cool if someone found a way to squash Belinda Quayle and her company like bugs.” He grinned and pushed the overlarge glasses up his nose again. “Turnabout and all that. I mean, I think it would be poetic justice, don’t you?”

He pushed his chair back with a rattle and scrape, and rose to leave. He had to make it back to the Empire State campus for a two-thirty lecture, he explained. “If I can do anything to help, let me know. Don’t see that I can, but you know where to find me.”

After he left, Matt sat with Ben Urich for a while, thinking about what they’d heard. Urich scavenged the garlic dill pickle from D’Orazio’s place and munched on it thoughtfully. Weird that a cucumber soaked in brine could produce such a crunch, Matt mused.

“Think the partner’s accident was an accident?” Ben asked at last.

“It happens,” Matt said. “And D’Orazio said he drank. But I’d sure like to have a little more information.”

“Done,” Urich said with relish. Matt knew that tone: Ben Urich was hooked on this story and wouldn’t let go until he understood it inside out, and had written it up so that everyone could understand it as clearly as he did. In his own way, that made Ben Urich as much of a crusader as Daredevil. “I’ll talk to some people I know in Jersey, though if the cops there didn’t rule it suspicious at the time, it’s unlikely there will be much to go on now. Next question: think it’s just the granddaughter, or do you think The Gray Eminence of Wall Street is involved too?”

“Bernard Quayle?” Matt raised an eyebrow. “My partner knows him, says he’s a tough businessman but that the

reports of ethical violations are out of line. Hiring thugs—”

“Not to mention murder,” Ben interjected.

“—is very different from creating a new investment strategy that the SEC outlaws after the fact. The granddaughter—”

“What’s she like?” Ben broke in again.

Matt thought about the question, and it gave him goose bumps. “She’s everything that Gregg said: persuasive, could probably sell water to fish, cold as ice and very pleased with her own smarts. Also very, very attractive.” His voice shook.

“*Matt?*” Ben drew the name out with a touch of amusement. “You thinking about other women? Does Karen know?”

Matt stood up, opened his cane. “It’s not like that. In fact, it’s weird. I don’t *like* Belinda Quayle; she’s manipulative and condescending and a whole thesaurus full of unpleasant. But there’s something about her that knocked my knees right out from under me. Made me feel like I was thirteen years old, watching the senior prom queen in the hall in high school.”

Urich whistled softly, then moved forward to take Matt’s elbow and guide him through the maze of tables and out to Houston Street. “So you think because she’s a babe that she’s capable of planning murder?”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t know. Where Belinda Quayle is concerned, I’m not trusting myself. Not until I get a few more facts to go on.”

“And I’m the fact-finder. Right. Listen, Murdock, whatever happens with this story, it’s mine, right?”

Matt held out his hand to the reporter. “The story is yours, Ben. Like always, if I have any say in it.”

Urich blew out a cloud of smoke and grinned. “Good enough.”

The conversation was not going at all well. Belinda Quayle eyed her speakerphone with dislike, as if she could see her grandfather reflected in its brass surface. Her office at RenanTech was a pale echo of the elegance of her office at Quayle-Partido—no view, for one thing, and no bank of monitors serving up market data—but it was better than it had been when she'd first taken over the company. In almost two years since that happened, her grandfather had never even been to the RenanTech offices, yet he continued to think he knew more about running the company than she did.

"All I'm asking is that you tell me exactly how you plan to contain this situation." Bernard Quayle's voice was calm and level, almost quiet, but that was not a good sign. The angrier Bernard got, the quieter he became. When he whispered, people had been known to run from his office in tears.

Belinda was not going to let the old man intimidate her. He was all the family she had, and she supposed she loved him, but she was tired of being judged, corrected, slowed down by him. There had been some setbacks on the RenanTech front, and David—she would admit it to herself, although not to her grandfather—had handled a few things appallingly. But it was okay. She was going to make it all come out right. After she got her grandfather off the phone.

"The situation is *controlled*, Grandfather," she said to Bernard. "The man who broke into our offices here is in custody, we—"

"Louis Bastuto? He's being represented by one of Rosalind Sharpe's partners, a man with a considerable reputation in the legal community. I would hate to think that Bastuto's case would draw undesirable attention to RenanTech, Bee."

If Bernard intended the nickname from her childhood to soften his criticism—or to reduce her to subordinate status

—he was out of luck. Belinda stiffened her spine and spoke coolly, utterly in charge.

“Actually, Grandfather, we’ve let his attorneys know that we’re planning a civil suit as well as criminal charges. With that leverage we should be able to get this Bastuto to plead the case out, get rid of the whole thing, and continue with everything as planned.”

“What if he brings suit against RenanTech?” Bernard asked silkily.

Belinda blinked at the phone. It had never occurred to her that Bastuto might do that. He was a mug, one of the people she was getting out of her new playground so she could bring the people with money *in*. “He has no case!” she protested. “What would he sue for?”

“Might false arrest be a possibility, Bee?”

The old man *knew*. How did he always know the things she hadn’t told him?

“Without a witness to his name, he couldn’t make it stick, grandfather.”

The silence at the other end went on so long that Belinda thought perhaps the connection had been broken. Then Bernard spoke again. “As for your plan to encourage the locals to relocate: do you think perhaps you’ve overplayed your hand?”

“No I do not,” Belinda said firmly. “We’re already seeing results. Bastuto was one of the central players in the locals’ movement against our expansion—”

“And the other one was on the radio last night.”

Belinda closed her eyes and counted to ten. “Yes, she was,” she said at last. “And now she’s in the hospital.”

Bernard said, very quietly, “Don’t you think that’s just a trifle unsubtle, my dear? And has it occurred to you that by the time we get the locals out of the neighborhood, we may not be able to bring the people we want? The people with money?” His voice changed. He took the tone he used when

he was being patient, even encouraging. Belinda Quayle slumped back in her chair like a child receiving a scolding.

"Belinda," he continued, "I let you finance RenanTech; it wasn't the sort of company I was familiar with, but that didn't make it wrong. I wanted to give you the chance to play a little, to prove yourself. I don't give that opportunity to everyone, my dear. Now, what happened with RenanTech's development delays with the nanotechnology was unfortunate, but there are risks to any investment, and I understand that, and I still believe it might pay out in the end. And I think that your interim plan to develop RenanTech's leasehold on the last major block of real estate in central Manhattan into a luxury development is an excellent one. But since that time, it seems to me, we have simply been getting in deeper and deeper—what's that?"

"Nothing, sir." In fact, she had muttered something unrepeatable under her breath.

"I wish I could say I was satisfied with the progress you've made in acquiring the property we're going to need for the development of West Haven—"

"We own the land or leasehold on more than a third of it, Grandfather!"

"—*and* I wish I could say that I was impressed with your response to local resistance to the development," he continued as if she had not spoken. "Or with your methods of encouraging the locals to leave. I am *not* confident that you have all the players under control," he said meaningfully. "And much as it pains me to say this, because I think you show great promise and ability—I would not have made you a partner here even with your pedigree, had I not believed that you would be good for Quayle-Partido—if things continue to spin out of control on the West Haven project, I shall have to step in myself and take it over."

Belinda felt herself flush up to the roots of her hair, and her hands balled into fists so tight her fingernails drew blood. But she kept her voice level and quiet, as quiet as

Bernard's. It was not for nothing that she was his granddaughter.

"That would be a very bad idea, Grandfather," she said coldly. "I have the situation under control, whether you choose to believe that or not. If you came in now you wouldn't know where to begin."

She thought she heard Bernard chuckle at the other end. "I'm sure I'd figure it out," he said soothingly. "I would hate to have it come to that, of course. Meanwhile, I suggest we drop the charges against Bastuto—"

"Drop the charges?!"

"I told Rosalind Sharpe that I'd look into things and arrange it. Unless you can give me a compelling reason to continue to press charges when doing so would bring some very undesirable attention to our operations ..."

Belinda sighed. "Give me forty-eight hours to demonstrate that Bastuto is no longer relevant."

"Certainly, Bee," he said silkily. "I don't want to be unreasonable. Ah ... Mrs. Bodmin has another call for me. I'll talk to you later, Belinda. Goodbye, David."

The connection was cut. Belinda Quayle stared across her desk at David Wachtel, who sprawled in one of the armchairs there. "How does he *do* that? I didn't tell him you were in the room."

Wachtel got to his feet and came around the desk to put his hands on her shoulders. "Don't let the old man bother you," he said carelessly. "He may have spies in the office, he may have the office wired with video cameras. In the end, it doesn't matter. We're stronger than he is." He ran his thumbs along either side of her spine, just at the point where neck and shoulder joined.

"Ow! David, be careful! You don't know your own strength!" But Belinda dropped her head to one side to nuzzle at his wrist. Wachtel eased up on the pressure, grinning down at her. She ran one hand up along his arm, feeling hard, defined muscle that was beginning to strain

the fabric of his expensive suit. "You need to go to the tailor again," she told him.

"So? I'll go." He brought his free hand around to cup her chin, then ran it down her throat to her collar bone, staying there. Belinda felt a little sensual charge, a pleasurable shiver: if he wanted to, he could crush her windpipe right now. The danger turned her on; David's physical power was unbelievably attractive, and his volatility had always added to the attraction for her. Because she could control him, and she knew no one else could. That was what her grandfather did not understand.

She tugged on his lapel and brought him down for a long, urgent kiss. Then pushed him away. He grinned, put his hands around her throat for a second and squeezed lightly, then stepped away and went back to his armchair.

"The Bug's done right by you, baby," Belinda murmured. "You were built before, but since you started on the Bug ..."

She eyed Wachtel appreciatively. He was tall and he'd always worked out, played sports and done the gym thing, but since he'd sampled RenanTech's one and only product, he had the look of a full-time bodybuilder: massive shoulders and chest, thighs and arms. He had to have his clothes specially tailored to fit properly.

"Maybe it's time for another dose," David suggested. His eyes gleamed. As much as Belinda liked his physical power, he seemed to like it more. Before the Bug, in college, he'd lifted weights, wrestled, fenced—until he was caught with an unbated foil that almost cost his opponent an eye. He was tossed off the fencing team, and soon after, off the wrestling team as well. Unnecessary roughness, they'd said. Suspected steroid use. Jealousy, David had said; he wasn't the only one on the team using drugs to bulk up. They'd targeted him because he was the best, and they had to bring him down somehow.

But the experience had been useful, anyway. When Belinda had first found RenanTech she'd been jazzed by the

possibility of nanotechnology, the sexiness of genetic engineering. It was David who saw in the Bug—they both called it by the original designers' pet name for their invention—the potential for a different, and very lucrative market. Start an underground buzz about the Bug as the new steroid, then sit back and watch while coaches and athletes lined up to buy and buy.

She'd never told her grandfather about the idea. Wanted to keep it a secret until it was paying off. Once it was approved by the FDA, doctors could prescribe the Bug for anything. It might be years before anyone official suspected individual athletes were on the Bug, and maybe years after that that anyone developed an on-site test. In the meantime, professional athletes, Olympians even, would flock to the doctors who could give them a shot of the Bug. And RenanTech would charge exactly enough, not so much that buyers would be scared off, but not a penny less.

The original RenanTech researchers had told them one shot was all it took—but you wouldn't turn a profit that way. What you needed was a drug that required boosters, additional doses, so that people would keep coming back. Which was why there was still a research team working away upstairs. Even when they broke ground for West Haven, RenanTech could be relocated, and the research team could continue to work, looking for a way to make the Bug's effects decay, requiring boosters. As for the side effects Carl Hauser and his partners had been so grim about—so it might cause a rapid heartbeat in some people. Put a warning on the label and forget it. Considering the good the Bug could do, why wouldn't the FDA rubber-stamp it?

Belinda looked at David, a walking poster for the power of the Bug. He certainly hadn't been hit by any side effects.

"Maybe it's time for another dose," he suggested once more.

She grinned. "I don't know, baby. Another dose and we may not be able to find a tailor who can fit you. Maybe there's such a thing as too much of a good thing—you're getting muscle-bound; I had to tie your tie for you this morning."

David's eyes narrowed. "I could have done it myself. You don't want me to get any stronger. You're afraid of me," he said, low. He had these flashes of paranoia, had always had them, but Belinda knew how to handle them, too. She got up, went around to his chair and sat on his lap. He was tall and massive and Belinda was tall also—but not too tall. The difference in their sizes made her feel doll-like beside him, but she was still in control.

"If I were afraid of you, would I be sitting here?" she murmured.

It took a minute, but she could feel him relax. He gave a snort of laughter. "You're sitting in the Cutter's lap."

Belinda leaned her head against Wachtel's shoulder and looked up, letting her breath tickle his chin. His arm came up around her.

"I'm sitting in the Cutter's lap," she agreed, "because we're a team. They can't stop us. No one can. Not even my grandfather," she added thoughtfully. "But I don't want to take on old Bernard unless I have to. He could make things more complicated than they have to be."

"Let me *uncomplicate* things," David suggested. "Like I uncomplicated the Sealy woman. After the message I sent last night, they're going to be leaving the neighborhood in droves."

Belinda placed a kiss on the underside of his jaw, then stood up.

"Let's talk about it before you do anything more like that," she suggested. "Grandfather's not entirely wrong. If we overplay the Cutter, we'll be building a ghost town." She saw his brows drawing together in that paranoid frown again. "Taking Sealy out of the equation was fine," she

assured him. "Especially after her little radio play last night. So let's just ... consult, okay? When I called from Q-P to tell you about the radio program, I didn't realize what you were going to do about it."

David smiled. "So I'll consult you next time," he agreed. "So, what are you going to do about the Bastuto thing?"

"Think." Belinda sat down in her own chair, a signal that it was time for David to return to his own office. She had work to do and, as she said, thinking. "Grandfather gave me forty-eight hours to come up with a reason not to back down over Bastuto. And I will not back down." Her voice hardened. "No one is going to challenge me and get off easily. *He* taught me that."

"Let him go," David suggested. "Let the Cutter take care of him."

Belinda shook her head. "That draws a line right back to RenanTech, and we don't want that. We're walking a very fine line, David. Don't upset the balance."

"I promised: nothing unless we consult."

They chatted for a few minutes more, then David left. Belinda sighed with relief. She had been in love with David since college, but sometimes ... he didn't think. She had to do the thinking for both of them. Which was all right, it made him easier to control, even with his flashes of paranoia. It worried her a little, more than she liked to admit, that he seemed to enjoy playing the Cutter so much. But she could handle that, too.

Her grandfather had taught her always to have a plan, and a couple of aces that no one else knew about. Just to be safe.

Belinda took a key from her center desk drawer and unlocked the bottom drawer of her handsome cherry-wood desk. She took out a matte-black metal box and unlocked it. Inside was an object the size of her palm, fashioned of black and translucent plastic: an inhaler. She flipped the

safety cap off one end, exhaled deeply, put the business end of the inhaler in her mouth, and pushed the button.

There was a tiny puff, but no discernible sensation in her mouth or lungs. Still, she knew she'd just gotten a full dose of the Bug—her second one. She was four doses behind David, and had no intention of pumping herself up like a cartoon weight lifter. Still, she saw the difference in herself already, even if David hadn't noticed it. Soon she'd have to have her suits altered or specially made.

One way or another, Belinda reflected, she'd have everything under her control. Including David. She would show Bernard Quayle what she could do. She would show him she was worthy of everything he'd built up. And whether or not he accepted that, sooner or later it would all be hers. Even the last laugh.



The smell of latex interior paint mingled with the smells of muslin drop cloths, dust, the sweat, shampoos and after shaves of forty-odd people, and the peculiarly flat smell of recirculated office A/C, touched with ozone and industrial cleaning fluid. The result was unpleasant even to the average, ordinary nose. To Matthew Murdock, it was torture.

On his return to the office, he had taken refuge in the conference room, sitting across the massive birch table from Foggy, who was dug in behind a stack of leather-bound tomes, filling sheet after sheet of yellow legal paper with rapid notes in his large, tidy script. Matt had a stack of his own to go through: audio-cassettes of depositions, and a Dictaphone recording of letters received. He could as easily have Brailled the letters with his fingertip, reading the impression left on paper by the pressure of a pen or pencil point or typewriter strike, reading the infinitesimal build-up of toner in the shape of letters on the page. But Julie went to the trouble to prepare the tapes for her blind boss, and in the office Matt felt it was only fair to behave like a blind boss. Every few minutes, one of the phones would ring, and either Foggy or Matt would answer it, speak briefly, and return to the paperwork.

They worked in a companionable silence that reminded Matt of when they were roommates at Columbia Law, eons ago, working their way through classes on tort law, procedures, and corporate law before they could get to the stuff they were both interested in: criminal law. In those days, Foggy would build himself a tower of all the books he had to review, plowing through them doggedly, reducing the pile on his desk one by one, building up a pile of the books he'd read on the floor around his chair. Across the room, Matt would be working with a mix of Braille books and books-on-tape, committing it all to memory with an ease that made his roommate gnash his teeth with envy. All

that was missing now was the pizza, and the sound of someone else's stereo booming Led Zeppelin down the hall.

The phone buzzed again, Matt's extension. He picked it up on the second ring.

"Matt Murdock."

"Mr. Murdock?" A dulcet alto voice at the other end. To his dismay, Matt felt a flush begin at his hairline and continue downward, all the way to his toes, by the feel of it. The voice was Belinda Quayle's.

"Ms. Quayle?" He took the most businesslike tone he could achieve. Subjectively, the mere recollection of their meeting two days ago made him feel like a teenage kid whose voice might break at any moment.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Murdock. The other day, when you came by?"

"Yes?"

She laughed. Matt's stomach flipped upside down. "I was in the middle of a major negotiation, something that had really gotten bollixed up. I was still in Big, Tough Belinda mode when we met, and I'm afraid I really wasn't very civil."

He wondered if she really cared, now or ever, whether she was civil to another human being. He also wondered, *How is this going to help my client?* But he played along. "That's all right, Ms. Quayle. I understand."

She sighed, playing up her relief. Everything about her was slightly overplayed. Even his physical reaction to her couldn't keep Matt from noticing her essential falseness.

"Is that what you called for?" he asked politely.

He thought there was a slight cooling in her voice when she answered, "No, actually, I felt so bad about the way the meeting ended, I wanted to see if we could meet again. Somewhere neutral, so I won't be tempted to bring my baggage along with me. We could talk about the situation with Mr. Basinto."

"Bastuto. When did you have in mind?" *Did this have something to do with the solution Rosalind worked out with Bernard Quayle ? Belinda pretends that everything's just ducky, and in the name of being a nice girl, drops the charges?* It didn't take Matt more than a second to decide that even a meeting with Belinda Quayle would be worth it, if it got Louis Bastuto out of Rykers.

"Well, let's see. I'm on Wall Street today—at the Quayle-Partido offices." She did him the compliment of assuming he'd done his homework and knew her pedigree. "You're in Midtown. How about a cup of coffee in the Village, about five-thirty? Do you know the Coffeteria on 12th and Broadway?"

"I don't know it, but I can find it," he told her. Flipped open his watch and Brailled the time. "Five-thirty? I can be there."

"Thank you so much. I really look forward to proving I'm not the monster I'm sure I seemed the other day."

What was he supposed to say to that? Matt wondered. "Five-thirty, then," he confirmed, and got off the phone.

Foggy was looking at him. From the tilt of his head and the fact that he was chewing a thumbnail, Matt could read his partner's curiosity, and his amusement.

"I haven't seen you squirm like that since Karen made friends with Natasha Romanoff," Foggy said. "Who on earth was that on the phone?"

"Belinda Quayle," Matt told him. "She wants to meet and discuss Louis Bastuto's case."

"You don't sound overjoyed," Foggy noted. Under the table, he was jiggling his foot rapidly; Matt could hear the brush of sock against pants leg with each movement.

"I'm not overjoyed. I think she's up to something. I just don't know what."

"But you're going to meet her?"

Matt nodded. "If she has a proposal that affects Louis Bastuto, I have to listen to it. Wish we could handle it on

the phone, though. She ...” He tried to think of how to describe it. *Reduces me to a screaming hormonal pulp?* “She gets to me. You think this is the solution Rosalind worked out with Bernard Quayle?”

Foggy put a hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Partner, this whole business is so convoluted, it makes my head hurt. My mother’s involvement doesn’t make it any easier to figure.”

“No,” Matt agreed. “It doesn’t, does it?” He went back to his depositions.

Karen Page had arrived at the hospital at mid-morning, hoping to see Siobhan Sealy. St. Clare’s was a crowded, shabby urban hospital, staffed by people trying their best to be healers in a city that did not allow them time to catch their breaths. They moved through the halls—doctors, nurses, caseworkers, orderlies, technicians, administrative workers—as if they were trying to find the shortest route between any two points. The hall smelled slightly of disinfectant and blood, which made Karen’s already queasy stomach even more rocky. Sitting on a brutally uncomfortable aluminum and vinyl chair in one of the waiting areas, she felt small and inconsequential: not a healer or in need of healing. Just a visitor hoping for absolution.

Karen could not rid herself of the feeling that Siobhan Sealy would have been safe if she had not done Paige Angel’s radio show. Waiting for the attending physician to finish with Siobhan, Karen wondered what she could say to her. “Gee, I’m sorry my instinct for a good radio show got you attacked and nearly killed by the local serial killer?”

Oh, that’s right, Karen. Make it all about you, why don’t you? She shook her head and watched people walking in and out of Siobhan’s room.

It was nearer to lunch than breakfast time when a male nurse passing by noted that she was still waiting. “Omigod, are you still sitting here? You can see Ms. Sealy anytime.”

He was gone down the hall before Karen could say thank you. Karen stood, nervously, in the door of Siobhan Sealy's room, half-afraid to be noticed.

But Siobhan cut Karen's guilt short within thirty seconds. "Well, I did it, didn't I?" she croaked. "Walking around in the middle of the night with no more sense than a tennis shoe. I don't want to hear you fretting about getting me in trouble, Karen. It's my fault for not using the brains God gave me and letting you drive me all the way home." She held out a hand and took one of Karen's in it. "Don't fret. The doctor says I'll be back to normal in no time. Didn't even need a transfusion or anything."

Her voice had a smile in it, but Karen had to assume the smile was there; most of Siobhan's face was swathed in dressings that made her look like a mummy. Karen remembered Matt saying that the Cutter had slashed her face as well as her body. Although she had the head of the bed raised and lay propped on pillows, she did not move much. Her torso was bandaged too: a dressing and strapping bandages bulked up the hospital johnny-robe she wore. Everything was spotted with tiny drops of blood and iodine solution and a yellow goo Karen thought must be antibiotic ointment. An IV threaded into her left arm.

Karen swallowed hard and smiled, then sat on the edge of the bed and let Siobhan draw her into small talk. All the while she was thinking, *Normal? How can things ever be normal when someone has played tic-tac-toe on your face with a Bowie knife?*

And yet, fifteen minutes later Karen was reading to Siobhan from the pile of cards that had already been delivered to St. Clare's for her; Siobhan couldn't wear her reading glasses over the bandages on her face. She seemed slightly embarrassed by the outpouring of friendship and affection the cards betokened.

"The kind words are all very well," she said peevishly. "But what I want to know is who's following up on

RenanTech? Are they using time going to the card shop that could be spent making phone calls? RenanTech's obviously planning construction; they'll have to have filed architect's plans, paid for permits—"

"Don't you think you ought to relax a little? You were kind'a attacked by a very big guy with a knife," Karen reminded her. "He's what you have to worry about. Forget about RenanTech for today."

Siobhan shook her head, then made a faint, muffled sound Karen suspected was a moan. "I can't forget about it. If we waste time while I'm in the hospital, the people behind RenanTech can build up momentum that'll be doubly hard to stop later. We don't even have a clue how far along their plans are!

"And," she said frankly, "well, they're not a bunch of fireballs at the co-op. Without me to stir 'em up, or Louis, it's going to be very hard indeed to maintain our momentum. I'm here, and poor Louis is off on Ryker's Island, which I'm sure is no picnic ... and there's poor Amy, sitting home waiting for word of him." She was pleating the thin white hospital sheet between her thumb and forefinger. "I love the co-op, Karen. We worked unbelievably hard to make it come together, and it did, and I don't want to lose it. Not even if they paid us all to move into some suburban dream cottage.

"Hey ..." She tilted her bandaged head to one side as if a brilliant idea had struck her forcefully. "Could you do another show?"

After what happened after the last one? Karen thought. "I do one every weeknight," she said cautiously. "What did you have in mind?"

Siobhan leaned forward, groaned again, leaned back among the pillows. "Anything that'll force RenanTech to admit what they're up to publicly would be good."

"I don't know," Karen said dubiously. "After what happened last night ..."

“We don’t know that the Cutter came after me because I did the show. Could be he was just waiting for someone, and I was the idiot he found. Look, Karen, if there’s one thing I was taught, growing up, it’s that you can’t give in on something important just because there might be a cost to you. You don’t strike me as the giving-in sort either. So give me the phone. I’ll make some calls and see if anyone’s turned up anything that would give us a better idea ...”

The older woman wasn’t going to stop, Karen realized. *So I might as well get right up there on the bandwagon with her.* She reached for the phone, but did not hand it to the other woman. “I can do better,” she said, and punched the number for information. “In Manhattan, a number for RenanTech, on 53rd Street, please.”

“What are you calling *them* for?” If she’d been able to see Siobhan’s face, Karen suspected her eyebrows would have been raised almost up to her hairline.

“Journalistic integrity,” Karen said cheerfully. “It’s only fair if I give RenanTech a chance to respond to the statements you made last night—”

“I don’t want them responding! I don’t want them drumming up sympathy—”

Karen shook her head. She was certain this was the way to go now. “It’s possible I can get information from them about what their plans are for your neighborhood. And even if they refuse to talk, I can take that on the air—”

“Offered a chance to respond, RenanTech said Drop Dead,” Siobhan finished in a fair imitation of Karen’s own voice.

“Exactly!” The robotic voice of Directory Assistance gave Karen the number. She dialed it and took a breath, shifting to her Paige Angel voice and persona. When she announced herself to the receptionist at RenanTech, the girl gave a panicked giggle; obviously one of Karen’s listeners, but as obviously under orders not to talk to the

press. She offered to connect Karen to the head of security, giggled again, and was replaced by the dead quiet of hold.

Then a man's voice picked up. "Wachtel." When he barked the name at her, Karen remembered that this was the guy Matt had told her about, the one who went ballistic at the very mention of Louis Bastuto. She put on her best non-threatening business voice.

"Good morning, Mr. Wachtel. My name is Karen Page; on WFSKI use the name Paige Angel—"

"I know who you are. You have that garbagey midnight talk show."

Garbagey talk show. Ouch. A sign of his interest in talking to the press? Tact, Karen, tact.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Wachtel. Did you hear the show last night?"

"I didn't," he put heavy emphasis on the *I*. Probably to let her know that he wouldn't be caught dead listening to a call-in-radio show.

"Last night, I had a guest on the show who leveled some charges at RenanTech—said that your company had plans for developing the neighborhood, and to that end has been working to devalue property and drive residents out of the area—"

"That's garbage," Wachtel roared. "No one has to *work* to devalue the property in that neighborhood."

"I think the neighborhood residents have a different take on the matter, Mr. Wachtel," Karen said sweetly. "Actually, I didn't call to debate the matter. To be honest, I don't know enough about it yet to do that. What I did want to do was offer you, or another of RenanTech's representatives, a chance to come on the show and present your side of the story to our listeners."

"Like your listeners matter," Wachtel muttered. "Not interested, Ms. Angel. You let those losers on the air, and that's your problem. Our lawyers are considering whether to sue you and WFSK for libel. In the meantime, if those

people don't like the neighborhood, let them move. Now *there's* a way to bring up the property values." His laugh was cut short; the line went dead.

Karen looked at the phone receiver in her hand as if it had just sprouted legs and started doing the cha-cha.

"Not helpful?" Siobhan asked dryly.

Karen grinned. "That's one way of putting it. So I guess I can, with a clean journalistic conscience, say that RenanTech was invited to present its side of the story, and refused to do so. Brilliant."

"That's not much for a whole radio show, Karen," Sealy said dubiously. "We have to get more on RenanTech than rudeness aforethought."

Karen picked up the phone again. "There's something about a guy who tells me there's nothing more to see that makes me immediately want to look behind the curtain and find out who's pulling the levers. Who shall we call first?"

When the nurse came by with a tray bearing Siobhan's lunch, Karen was sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed, taking dictation as fast as Siobhan, holding the phone to one bandaged ear, could give it to her.

The Coffeteria was one of the too-hip-for-words designer coffee bars that were sprouting up over Manhattan. This one was a cavernous space with old-fashioned pressed tin ceilings and deeply upholstered armchairs. Coffee cost three dollars; the mocha latte that Belinda Quayle was drinking cost five-fifty. Matt settled for a cup of black coffee and sat on a velour-covered love seat with aggressive springs. He made sure that Belinda sat across the table from him, and even so he had to focus on the taste of his coffee, on the scents and noises in the shop, and on the actual words Belinda was saying. When he didn't, when he let himself notice the scent of her perfume, with the warm scent of her skin just below it, he found himself drifting off into fantasies that were neither useful nor businesslike.

"I'm so glad you could come down," Belinda said. "I wouldn't have imposed on you to meet me, but I was at RenanTech this morning, then at Quayle-Partido this afternoon, and I have to be back at Q-P this evening. Going *all* the way up to your offices would be such a strain ..."

Matt heard the unspoken words *on li'l ol' me* at the end of her sentence. He had the feeling that if she'd dared, Belinda would have gone as far as talking baby-talk to impress him with how defenseless and vulnerable she was. His best tack was to remain strictly businesslike.

"I'm still not clear why you wanted to meet in person, Ms. Quayle," he said cautiously. He took a sip of the coffee, one of those specialty blends, too strong and too dark for his taste.

"I just thought, since I'd been so unconscionably rude the other day, I should apologize in person."

Matt sighed. "I appreciate the thought, but really, Ms. Quayle, my feelings don't much matter. I'm far more concerned for my client—"

She nodded vigorously. "I know. And I wanted to let you know that after looking into the matter, I've decided we should drop the charges against Mr. Bastuto. But we'd like to ask for something in return."

Here it comes.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Mr. Bastuto and his neighbors have to calm down. Realize that RenanTech is not their enemy, and let us conduct our business in peace."

"I'm sure that Louis Bastuto and his neighbors would be delighted to hear from you about RenanTech's plans. That's really all they've ever asked," Matt told her.

An edge crept into Belinda's voice. "I don't want to talk to your client. Really, Mr. Murdock, RenanTech is a medical technology research firm. We don't have time to massage the community every time someone gets a paranoid

delusion about our intentions toward the neighborhood. They need to back off and let us do our business.”

In other words, we'll let your client go free if you guarantee no interference in anything we have planned. Great.

“I can’t undertake that for the whole community, although I’ll certainly take your offer to Mr. Bastuto—but Ms. Quayle, if someone with RenanTech would meet with them once, answer their questions, which strike me as extremely reasonable, I’m sure that they would indeed back off and let you do your business.”

By what Matt’s hypersenses told him from six feet away, Belinda was blinking too often, her heart rate was up, and her skin was flushed. *You really don't like being challenged at all, do you?* he thought.

“Mr. Murdock, I really have to insist. If your client expects RenanTech to drop the charges after his criminal behavior, then he is going to have to convince those people he lives with to back off. I’m trying to get a high-tech business off the ground, and neither I nor my staff have the time to deal with the kind of petty territoriality those people are demonstrating.”

“*Does RenanTach have expansion plans?*” Matt asked blandly.

Her heart rate ratcheted up a few notches. The perfumed surface of her skin was hotter. “That is no more your business than it is theirs, Mr. Murdock.” She took an angry, sloppy sip of her latte. “Look, of course we have hopes that the company will take off, and of course then we’ll need to expand.”

Lies, Matt thought.

“Frankly, I don’t see why any of them stay in the neighborhood—especially the ones with children. There have to be better places for people like that to live.”

People like *what?* Like Louis Bastuto and his family, or Siobhan Sealy, or the people who had run out into the

night, responding with bare-handed bravery to Sealy's screams, while he fought for her life with the Cutter? People like Hassan Denges or Jack Murdock? Yeah, he knew who she was talking about. Down on their luck, low income, people who spoke with accents redolent of Bombay or Galway, who hadn't gone to college. Who worked with their hands. People like *that*.

"I think most of them stay in the neighborhood because it's their home, Ms. Quayle." He thought of walking out right now. "Look, I'll talk to my client, take him your offer, and get back to you as soon as I can."

"You do that. You've got twenty-four hours, then the offer is withdrawn, Mr. Murdock. I've used up far too much time and energy on Mr. Bastuto. As it is, I'm going to have real problems with one of my best executives because we're offering a get-out-of-jail card to the man who attacked him with a baseball bat." She stood up, picked up her Coach handbag, and turned to go.

"Then why are you doing this?" Matt asked.

She blinked rapidly.

"I'm doing it to improve RenanTech's relationship with the community," she answered without irony. "Now, I've got a company to run. I'm so glad we could talk. Give me a call when your client decides to make a sensible decision."

She held out her hand to Matt; he ignored it, thankful that his blindness offered him the excuse to avoid touching her. As she walked out through the tables, he could hear the slide of muscle and bone: heads turning appreciatively.

Matt finished his three-dollar coffee, feeling tension ooze out of his muscles as he sat there. It wasn't the coffee that relaxed him, it was the fact that he could let down his guard, stop defending himself from her scent, her voice. He had a sour taste on his tongue, a rancid, unpleasant taste that was somehow reminiscent of her perfume. She had gone from princess to bulldozer in a few moments' time, throwing her corporate weight around and expecting Matt

to be impressed. She and Wachtel were an interesting pair, but while it seemed that Wachtel was pure bully, interested in hurting people for his own amusement, Belinda Quayle clearly didn't think people existed except to please her.

He wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

The last few drops in his coffee cup were sour. Matt left the Coffeteria and hailed a cab to take him home. He had a sudden powerful need to see Karen before she went off to do her show.

David Wachtel had followed Belinda to the Coffeteria with a growing sense of outrage. It was one of the places they went together; he did not like it that she was meeting someone else there, particularly the blind lawyer for that neighborhood creep, Bastuto. Wachtel stood three doors down and across the street, leaning against the wall of a small Haitian travel agency; although he carried a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* folded in one hand, he did not even pretend to read it. He stared steadily at the Coffeteria. When a gaunt, elderly black man sidled up to Wachtel and opened his mouth to ask for a handout, Wachtel gave him a look that could have curdled water, and the panhandler sidled away, shaking his head in disapproval.

If I had my knife, Wachtel thought, you'd be down on your knees praying, you nobody, you nothing ...

He watched as Belinda smiled at the lawyer, charmed him; he could tell from the way the lawyer was sitting, leaning slightly forward with his head at a listening tilt, that the lawyer was attracted to Belinda. Anyone in his right mind would be, and Belinda could use that attraction to her advantage like no one else he knew. But Wachtel also knew that Belinda couldn't always be trusted to know the smart thing to do. She couldn't be trusted to trust *him*. What she thought was to her advantage might not be, and lately she wouldn't give him a chance to explain where she was going wrong. She thought, since she'd got the MBA,

she knew better than he did. He knew better. He'd always known better. That was why he had put a tap on her phone. In the past few weeks, she had begun to act strange, secretive, untrustworthy. He had tried to make her understand: he was doing everything for her, taking the risks, protecting what they had built up, defending it from the people in the neighborhood, from lawyers like this Murdock, even from her grandfather if necessary. Belinda knew how absolutely essential he was to her.

Belinda knew she needed him.

But why was she meeting out of the office with the lawyer? What good could he be to her? A lawyer for the creeps from the neighborhood. *Blind*. Hardly even a man. Somewhere a wisp of idea, not even a suggestion really, presented itself to Wachtel: she was going to solve the problem with Bastuto by bringing over Bastuto's lawyer. She was going to beat him by offering him a spot at RenanTech. Maybe Wachtel's spot.

No, that made no sense: Belinda knew she needed him. But maybe Belinda didn't know the other thing about Murdock that Wachtel knew. After he'd seen the business card in Omar Glass's pocket, Wachtel had asked around, trying to understand the connection. Murdock already had a girlfriend, and she was the woman on the radio who'd caused all the trouble last night: Paige Angel, whose real name was Karen Page. Probably the blind lawyer had set Page onto RenanTech's tail himself, set her up to embarrass RenanTech and Belinda and himself. The woman had even called him a couple of hours ago. And now Belinda was meeting with him. Didn't know that even a blind lawyer could be dangerous. Didn't know that that creep Glass, who'd done a couple of nasty jobs for them, was in touch with the lawyer. She didn't know any of that. She needed him.

Because it was not possible that Belinda could somehow be conspiring with Glass and Murdock. Not possible at all.

Wachtel watched Belinda charm the lawyer, but toward the end something went wrong. She was smiling that taut, angry smile, and when she stood up to go, she was a little clumsy, as she always was when someone stopped her from getting what she wanted. The lawyer had not performed to expectation.

The lawyer was just another thing to take care of, Wachtel reflected. Tonight, he'd put on the black clothes and take up the knife, and show Belinda that he was all she needed to take care of her, to look out for her. He would start with Karen Page.

Before Belinda could spot him, Wachtel turned down 12th Street, heading for University, where he could get a cab back to RenanTech.

Karen Page was a woman with a mission.

Matt had found her sitting cross-legged in the living room with papers in neat stacks around her, making notes in her rapid, angular script. When he came in, she had looked up, greeted him absently, and gone back to reviewing what she had written in her notebook. Matt had judged this a bad time to talk, and had gone into the kitchen to get a drink of water. When he returned, Karen had bundled the stacks of paper on the floor into a couple of tall, precarious piles, with her notebook on the very top.

"How is Sealy doing?" he asked mildly, settling himself in the biggest armchair, the one that could hold both of them, if they squeezed a little. Sitting in the chair was a tacit invitation to join him, but Karen wasn't thinking that way.

"She'll make it, but the marks on her—God, Matt, you wouldn't believe the bandages." She forgot, Matt reflected, that he'd already experienced Sealy's wounds at their worst, last night, as Daredevil. "Half the neighborhood showed up this afternoon, and they left a couple of people to watch after her, just in case. In the meantime ..." Karen

paced back and forth before him, gesturing as she talked out her anger. "In the meantime, I'm spending tonight's show talking about the attack, and RenanTech, and—"

"Is that the best idea?"

Karen stopped pacing and turned to Matt, hands on hips. From the sound of her voice, sparks should have been flying out of her eyes and setting tiny fires among the papers on the floor. "I have to do *something*, and this is what I can do. There were other press there this afternoon, wanting to talk to the Cutter's latest victim. At least I want to talk about the threat to the neighborhood that probably precipitated the attack."

"Karen ..." Under any circumstance, Matt knew, Karen would have wanted to see Sealy's attacker caught and punished. But Karen was also carrying around a load of guilt because she hadn't made Sealy stay in the car while the cab went around the block. Because she couldn't stop thinking that putting Sealy on the air had been tantamount to putting up a huge sign on her back that said STRIKE HERE.

And someone had.

"Has it occurred to you that you might become a target if you center the show on Siobhan Sealy?" he asked, as mildly as possible.

"Your point is?" she asked sharply.

Matt sighed. With the load of guilt Karen was carrying around, warning her of danger was like waving a red flag.

"My point is, I love you and I don't want to have to bring you flowers at St. Clare's," he said quietly. "My point is, please be careful."

The anger rushed out of Karen with a sigh. She sat on the arm of his armchair and slid down into his lap. "Was I on a soapbox?" she asked.

He put his arm around her shoulders and brushed the top of her head with his chin. "Can't read the label," he said. "Could be soap. Could be peaches. Look, far be it from me to keep you from doing a brilliant radio show that would

help my client ... but remember, if that nutbar with the knife went after Siobhan Sealy, he could quite easily come after my favorite radio personality. Also, the lawyer in me compels me to remind you that there are such things as libel laws. If Paige Angel makes unsubstantiated claims on her show—”

Karen sat upright. “But that’s just it, Matt! After I left St. Clare’s, I went back to Siobhan’s apartment to pick up her messages and look over the notes she had on RenanTech’s ownership of property—”

Matt blinked. “More than the building they’re in, and the land next door? I knew they’d filed development *plans*, but they have ownership of the actual real estate?”

“It’s all public record, but it’s tricky to sort out because they’ve used a whole network of holding companies to hide the fact that RenanTech and Quayle-Partido have been on a buying spree in your old neighborhood. Matt, the area they’re buying up starts around 52nd and runs down to 48th. And it extends east, toward 9th Avenue. The co-op that Siobhan and the Bastuto family live in is one of the pockets they *don’t* own yet, and if I lived there, it would make me very nervous. I surely would want to know what their intentions were.”

“In other words, Louis Bastuto and Siobhan Sealy *aren’t* crazy—the gaslights really *are* dimming.” Matt thought back to Belinda Quayle’s statement that afternoon. “RenanTech owns more property than would be reasonable for expansion, huh?”

“Reasonable expansion? Unless they’re planning on building the new Rockefeller Center or a Donald Trump kind of thing, I’d say they’ve overbought.” Karen kissed Matt’s jaw lightly and got up. She started pushing the piles of paper on the floor into a tote bag—there were more than would fit into her briefcase—and grinned at him. “I’ll bet there’s an architect somewhere who’s doing preliminary

drawings for some kind of development on that property. So, counselor, may I do my radio show, pretty please?"

"If the property ownership is all public record, you're safe, legally; I'd tread carefully on the subject of what they've got planned for the space. But Karen, right now RenanTech isn't what worries me. Don't underestimate the Cutter. He is very big, and he's ... really crazy. Don't decide that tonight is the night for a midnight stroll home. Take a cab, and make sure the cabbie waits until you're inside."

"I take it you're going out," Karen asked.

"In a little while," Matt agreed. "I can't be sure that the Cutter will follow a logical pattern—that is, attack your own lovely self. I want to make sure everyone in the neighborhood is safe. And I have a couple of questions that I might just find answers for on the street."

Karen put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "Be careful, Matt. That shiner is just beginning to fade; you don't need another, and I *do* need you. Okay?"

He kissed her lightly. "No shiners, promise." They were always careful not to talk too much about the danger of his work as Daredevil; looking at the risk too closely could cause a rift that would break up the relationship. Instead, Karen voiced her fear from time to time, lightly; and Matt listened and didn't scoff at her. It wasn't a perfect compromise, but it was still working.

After Karen left, Matt got himself something to eat and listened to the TV news, which rehashed the morning's report of the Cutter's attack on Siobhan Sealy. "Witnesses say the woman was rescued by the costumed vigilante called Daredevil, but when the police arrived, neither he nor the Cutter could be seen. Apparently Daredevil permitted the Cutter to escape to stalk the city anew tonight. People are urged, particularly in the Hell's Kitchen area, to stay indoors if at all possible, to take public transportation, and to avoid unpopulated areas."

“And that’s a shame, Mark, because tonight’s going to be mild and clear ...” The voice of another announcer broke in, segueing smoothly to the weather.

Matt turned the TV off, disgusted. *Permitted* the Cutter to escape to stalk the city anew? *Once again, it’s all the fault of the guy in the tights, Jeez.*

He was still sitting, smarting at the remark, when the phone rang.

“Mr. Murdock? This is Omar Glass.”

Omar Glass rarely used his cellphone. At half-a-buck a minute, it was a luxury his erratic income didn’t always support. Still, it beat having to find a working pay-phone in this city, and it certainly beat trying to have a sensitive conversation with someone while a line of people bitched at him for holding them up.

The night was warm and clear, but Omar shivered slightly and turned his back to the light, slouching over the cellphone as if it were generating warmth on a cold night. In his left hand he held the phone, and the scrap of pasteboard that Daredevil had pressed into his hands a few nights ago. He fumbled a little as he punched the numbers on the card, had to hang up and try again once, when he misdialed. At last the phone was pressed to his ear, ringing louder than you’d expect from a little piece of plastic like that. But he’d spent the extra bucks and got the best-sounding phone he could find; he’d paid for loud-and-clear and he was getting it.

“Mr. Murdock? This is Omar Glass. Uhh, this may sound crazy, but you know Daredevil?” Omar hoped that maybe Murdock would say no, tell him he was nuts, hang up on him.

“I’ve met him. Do you have a message for him?” The pleasant baritone at the other end sounded as if it fielded phone calls for paranormals every day of the week.

“Uh, yeah. Thought he might like to know that the Cutter, the guy he’s looking for? Word is that he don’t like the kind of press he’s been getting. ‘Specially from that chick on the radio last night was calling him crazy and stuff. Paige Angel, the late-night talker? Cutter seems to be pretty ticked off with her, and he’s got some place on ...” Glass broke off and shuffled another paper forward so he could read the address scrawled on it. It wasn’t his handwriting, which made it harder. “He’s got some place on 12th Avenue and 15th Street, might be where he’s planning to party with Paige Angel. Daredevil might wanna break it up, you know?”

The voice at the other end thanked Glass, promised that Daredevil would get the message. They both hung up.

Glass turned and looked up at the man standing behind him. “That okay?” he asked, nervously.

David Wachtel nodded. “You’ve been very helpful,” he told Omar.

Glass sighed in relief as Wachtel withdrew the big, black-metal Bowie knife from his neck. He smiled. “Told you I could do the job,” he said. “Didn’t need to use that knife. I came through for you with that guy Hauser. You can rely on me, Mr. Wachtel.”

Wachtel nodded and put his huge, muscled left arm around Glass’s shoulders. The embrace was too tight, Wachtel didn’t seem to know his own strength, and Glass wished the bigger man would put that knife away. But Glass kept grinning; showing fear was not the move.

Then Omar felt a pain so hot and bright it could have exploded the sun. He looked up at Wachtel’s face for a moment, at his broad smile. Then he looked down at the knife that was buried to the hilt in his abdomen, just above the belly-button. The muscles around the knife contracted and Glass started to double over around the knife. Wachtel was still holding the knife, ripping it up through Glass’s

body, slicing through a rib as if it were cardboard, then turning the blade and twisting it out of the body.

Omar Glass fell like a stone to the floor of the warehouse.

"Thanks very much," Wachtel said. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blade of the Bowie clean. "You've been *very* helpful."

He bent and tucked the bloodied handkerchief into Glass's pocket before he sauntered out of the warehouse.

Paige Angel had started out her show talking about Siobhan Sealy, painting a picture of the woman as she'd seen her that afternoon, bandaged and on painkillers, surrounded by friends, turning away questions about her own pain, changing the subject back to the co-op, to their investigation. Mindful of Matt's suggestions—and wary of a visit from WFSK's Corporate Counsel, screaming about lawsuit liability—Karen stuck closely to the public record information Siobhan and her neighbors had found. She carefully did not say that RenanTech might be responsible for the attack on Siobhan, nor did she say that there might be a link between the Cutter and RenanTech. She simply put the facts forward in the order that pleased her ... and started taking calls.

It only took three calls before Lynaire, from New Jersey, suggested a link between RenanTech and the Cutter. After that, Karen simply sat back, said hello and thank you, and let her callers pretty much argue the matter between themselves.

As sometimes happened, the calls started to slow down shortly before the program's end. Karen put on her best soothing, slightly seductive Paige Angel voice to say good night. "I want to thank all of you who called in to talk tonight. I have to admit that, in my mind, the whole link between Quayle-Partido, RenanTech, and Hell's Kitchen, needs a lot more scrutiny than we've been able to give it.

Maybe our friends on the printside of the journalism coin should be taking notice. And I want to say a special good night to Siobhan, who I hope didn't stay up to listen tonight: you need your rest, girl. Now, it's time to say good night. This is Paige Angel on WFSK, New York. And now, sweet New York, it's time for bed. Close your weary eyes and dream of me."

Karen watched for Patrick's signal that they were off the air, then slumped back in her chair, drained.

"Nice show." Patrick came into the room long enough to plop down a pile of notes and messages that had accumulated during the show—the top message, Karen noted, was from Ian Hunter, WFSK's manager. It said simply "Tread lightly!" Just as well she hadn't received that note while she was on the air. Around the words, Patrick had doodled a stick-figure mob storming a castle with the station's call letters in glowing neon on the roof; Hunter's matinee-idol profile peered timorously from a window near the top of the castle.

"You and your delicate sense of humor!" Karen called after Patrick, but he had vanished. Probably had a date.

Karen took up her bag and started to shuffle all the file folders she'd brought with her back into it, then thought better of it. *Too tired, too much to carry. I'll come back tomorrow and get them*, she promised herself, and stacked the folders on top of one of the cabinets in the rear of the studio. A light glowed through the control room window: Evan Marts, who did the graveyard jazz show immediately after hers, starting up his set. She waved in his direction, slid the pile of messages into her bag, and left the studio.

In the cab she flipped through the messages in the flickering street light. This time she saw the one from Matt. It was terse—*probably stuff he didn't want to tell Patrick*, she thought—and simply said, "Stay at studio until he calls."

Too late for that, Karen thought, as the cab sped up Broadway. Anyway, she was too tired to stay at the studio for anything other than a stone emergency. If Matt was upset when he got home, she'd deal with it men. She did have the cab driver stay in front of the house to watch her enter the building. Once she was inside, behind the big front door with its bristle of locks, she waved at the driver and watched him pull away. Then she trudged to the elevator, rode upstairs marveling at how long, and with what groans of protest, the thing took to go six floors.

"It's as tired as I am," she mumbled to herself as she unlocked the door.

The answering machine blinked at her: a flash, pause, a flash, pause. One message. *A quiet evening, thank God*. Karen dropped her purse on the hall table and shoved the briefcase she'd brought back from the studio under her work table with one foot, so no one—meaning herself—would trip on them. Matt didn't trip over things. On the other hand, he had left the bedroom window open again; a stiff breeze whisked through the apartment, stirring her hair and ruffling the papers on Karen's work table. She would have to talk to him about that. It was one thing in June, but a couple of times he'd left the window gaping open in January, and that had been distinctly unpleasant to come home to.

Without turning on the lights, Karen went into the bedroom, slid the window shut, and kicked off her shoes.

"Great show," a voice spoke from the other side of the room.

In the blackness, all Karen could see was a smile, wide and gleaming, that scared her as much as she had ever been scared in her life.



There were three warehouses fronting the West Side Highway at 50th Street—one that extended the full length of the block from 49th Street to 50th, and two that ran from 50th to 52nd. All three were shuttered up, their exteriors bleached and ghostly in the strong light of halogen street lamps along the highway. Crouched in the shadows on one of the rooftops, Daredevil was almost invisible; his crimson costume looked almost black, from the toes of his Vibram-soled boots to the tiny horns on his head. Daredevil waited, motionless, like a wild animal scenting the wind for prey. He was searching for a sign of the Cutter, but in the half hour he'd been sweeping the neighborhood, there had been nothing.

He had left the apartment hoping to find the Cutter before the big man got within a mile of Karen, but so far, despite the information Omar Glass had given him, there had been no sign of him near the West Side Highway.

Nothing.

In fact, there was no sound of anything in the warehouses on 50th Street: not even the pad-and-click of a guard dog wandering unlit halls, or the scuffing leather soles of a security guard making his rounds. It wasn't terribly surprising; security in the warehouses in Hell's Kitchen was often lax, even nonexistent. But these warehouses were ghost-town quiet, and Daredevil had to wonder: had Glass's lead been good?

What had Glass said, and how had he said it? Daredevil thought back to the phone call: Glass had sounded nervous, his heartbeat accelerated and powerful, but given the way Daredevil had leaned on the man the last time they'd met, he was entitled to be nervous. The fact was, it was harder to use his "lie detector" skills over the phone than it was in person. There were three possibilities: That Glass had told the truth and his lead was correct—in which case, where was the Cutter? That Glass had told the truth, but had wrong data—in which case, the Cutter could be anywhere

doing anything. Or, finally, that Glass had lied to him. In which case, see option number two, and add on a world of trouble from Daredevil.

Karen was safe, anyway. He'd called WFSK before leaving the apartment and left a message that she wasn't to leave the office until she heard from him. Since always before the Cutter had struck out in the open, somewhere without much traffic—or in Siobhan Sealy's case, had grabbed her on the street and dragged her into a burned-out building—Daredevil didn't believe the big man would venture into a secured office building with guards, closed circuit TV, and witnesses (even at this hour) in order to snatch a victim. As long as Karen stayed put, she'd be perfectly okay.

The man in red sprang up from the shadows and, in one fluid, powerful motion, cast the grappling line from his billy club across the street and swung over 50th Street, moving north toward the RenanTech building. As he moved from rooftop to rooftop he was still listening, reaching out with his hypersenses. Maybe the first person he should be finding was Omar Glass, he thought. *Double-check that message with ol'Omar up close, live and direct.*

At 52nd Street, he sensed people in the building below him. A dozen or so, moving slowly and dreamily, as befit the hour. Night shift workers, he thought; from the sound of keyboards rattling under skilled fingertips, probably data-entry clerks. The snatches of conversation he could hear confirmed it: a sitcom rehash, a guy worrying about his wife's job stability, and a woman vigorously assassinating the character of an absent co-worker named Robin. Not exactly blood-curdling (though he reflected he was glad he wasn't the absent Robin). Up another block and he was on the roof of RenanTech, which was closed for the night. Daredevil picked up the heartbeat and the slow, measured breathing of someone sleeping on the first floor—a guard

dozing at the reception desk—and the whisper of a television set to its lowest volume.

Quiet night, he thought, and reached out with his senses again, just to be sure, trying to find any thing amiss at RenanTech, but there was nothing—

Hey.

There was something, faint, but not coming from RenanTech. He heard something wrong on the far side of the street. Daredevil stopped, poised on the roof of the building, staring across 53rd Street to one of the warehouses there. It was shuttered up, plywood planks over its doors and most windows, but even through the muffling plywood he could make out weak, shallow heartbeats, and a thin, thready rale of breath. He dived off the roof and caught a light pole, swinging around it one-armed before he swung off into a somersault and landed by the plywood door of the warehouse.

He only heard only one heartbeat, the one that had drawn him down. He pulled on the rope handle of the plywood door, and was moderately surprised to find it unlocked, swinging ponderously open under his hand. As he stepped into the warehouse he was slapped with the powerful smells of dust and stagnant water, of machine oil and moldy canvas, paint and chemicals. Threading through and under those familiar smells was another one he knew, if anything, better. The flat, coppery smell of human blood, fresh.

He moved into the warehouse, following rales of breath so faint they were almost imperceptible, and the scent of blood. Across the first room, into the next. At the far end, beyond the shrouded forms of machines and desks, there was a single folding director's chair with a bulb burning overhead.

Omar Glass lay under the lamp in a spreading puddle of blood.

Daredevil swore under his breath. *Set up.*

Glass had been gutted and left to die. *The Cutter*, Daredevil thought. Glass was unconscious and had lost an enormous amount of blood; that he was still alive was extraordinary, but Daredevil doubted he would last much longer. This was the moment when he wished he carried a cellphone to summon help, an ambulance, the police. He didn't want to waste time finding someone to help Glass; he wanted to find Karen and make sure she was all right.

Then, lying to one side of Glass's body, he found a cellphone. Without pausing, Daredevil dialed 911 and reported an assault victim near death. Before the EMS operator could ask who he was to be so helpful, Daredevil had hung up. Then he called WFSK, calling as Matt Murdock to ask for Karen.

The call was answered by Joe Diskin, the overnight engineer who came on after Karen and Patrick Hinds finished their shift. "They both split after Paige's show," Jimmy said.

"Did she get my message?" Matt asked.

"Dunno. I think she must have, there weren't any leftover messages on the desk when I came on. Geez, you mean Karen's not home yet?" Joe's voice took on a shade of concern.

The last thing he needed was someone else panicking. "I haven't called home yet," he said. "Just wanted to touch base, and I thought I'd get her here."

"Ah, she's probably at home in bed," the engineer said. "Look, I gotta get back to the show. 'Night."

" 'Night," he echoed. *Okay, genius, what now?* he asked himself. Then he dialed one more number: home. After four rings, the phone was picked up. He allowed himself a moment of hope that it would be Karen herself, answering the phone, telling him not to worry, urging him to go get the bad guys.

"Hi! You've reached Matt and Karen's answering machine ..."

“Karen? If you’re there, pick up. Karen?”

Nothing.

He could hear the first of the police cars roll up out front, and the sharp thud of car doors slammed shut. An ambulance wailed nearby, heading in. Time to go.

Daredevil hit the END button, closed the phone, and replaced it on the floor near Glass’s hand. He stepped back, out of the light, as a pair of uniforms burst into the room, weapons drawn and flashlights bouncing circles of light all over the place.

“I called in the 911,” Daredevil said calmly. “If you promise not to shoot me, I’ll tell you who did it.”

The two cops—one a tall, blocky female, the other a man of medium height, thin but with the beginnings of a doughnut belly—advanced into the room. The man kept his weapon trained on Daredevil while the woman moved forward to investigate the body.

“It’s Glass,” the female cop said. Evidently she was familiar enough with Omar to feel a little sick at the sight of him. She turned back to Daredevil. “How’d you get mixed up in this?”

“He called a friend of mine, said he had a tip about the Cutter. I didn’t find the Cutter, but I did find Glass.”

The female cop was checking Glass’s body for a pulse. “He’s alive, but I wouldn’t bet he’s gonna stay that way. Think the Cutter did this?”

Daredevil nodded. “And I may know where he’s going. I’d love to stay, but—”

“Oh, no you don’t,” a voice spoke from the doorway. The detective sergeant from Midtown South, Hawkins. Behind him, Daredevil could sense another man: Drew, the detective’s partner. “Friedlander, Caponsacco, you can lower your weapons. But *you* don’t go anywhere, Daredevil.”

I don’t have time for a party.

"Look," Daredevil said. He tried to keep his voice reasonable, but he wasn't feeling reasonable. The need to find Karen was tugging at him with increasing urgency. "Glass called a lawyer friend of mine with a tip about the Cutter, including a threat against the life of Karen Page, the radio show host. I don't see Page here, and frankly, I'm a little concerned."

"I can put out an all-points—" Hawkins said.

"That would be good. But I can move faster than you guys can."

Drew leaned forward to mumble something to Hawkins: "Let him go."

"Let him go?" The male uniform's voice was outraged. "The lieutenant will have a cow—he *hates* costumes."

"Lieutenant Golden has been broadening his horizons, Friedlander," Drew told the uniform. "Since Spider-Man helped with Captain Esteban's kidnapping a while back, we're working on a new policy: tolerance." He turned back to Daredevil. "Tolerance to a point, DD. You probably *can* find the Cutter faster than we can. But turn him over in one piece, all right?"

"Will do," Daredevil called back over his shoulder. Already he was moving toward the window, plotting his way across the rooftops to his home.

Hoping that Karen had been in the shower, getting the mail, *something* simple and benign, when he'd called her.

What he found in his apartment shattered that hope.

The lights were off, the front door wide open, and furniture, books and papers were strewn all over. He detected the flickering warmth of the message light on the answering machine: one message, probably his call from the warehouse. Daredevil moved into the apartment, checking everywhere.

Signs of a struggle, he thought.

The air in the room was rich with the scent of Karen's perfume, with an added tang of adrenaline. There was another smell, unfamiliar to him, that he thought must be her assailant's scent. It was too faint to follow. Returning to the door, he detected a third, coppery scent that wafted up from the floor—a long, thin streak of blood near the door sill.

Karen was trying to leave a track.

Touch, touch, touch, Karen thought.

She knew it was a long shot, but it was something. She couldn't let this monster take her without leaving something for Matt to follow. And doing something—tearing off a fingernail with her teeth and smudging the bloody tip wherever she could—distracted her from her fear.

Touch, touch, touch.

The Cutter had dragged her downstairs and out into the street, one massive arm crooked around her neck. She couldn't run, didn't dare scream; he had only to squeeze his arm and she'd choke, or her neck would snap, she wasn't sure which, but she was very sure it would kill her. Upstairs in the apartment, she'd tried to run, tried to dodge past him. She'd made a mess, thrown books and papers at him, as much to leave a message for Matt as in hope that she could hurt the man. He was so big; she barely came up to his shoulder, and he was almost grotesquely muscled; the knit fabric of his black shirt strained at the seams.

Not just big, but very, very fast. That's what Matt had told her, wasn't it? It seemed years ago, the morning after he had first fought the Cutter. Three days.

Touch, touch, touch.

Out in the street, he stood for a moment as if trying to decide which way to go. Then he'd dragged her off to the left—she'd quickly left a bloody scrape on a sign pole—and pushed her into the back seat of a big car. A nearly new Mercedes, and he had the keys. As he slid into the driver's

seat, the Cutter was muttering to himself, growling. Lying on the back seat, Karen couldn't make out what he was saying, but maybe he was preoccupied with his monologue—and pulling out into the sparse post-midnight traffic—so that she could get away. She wasn't tied, and the car wasn't moving too fast—in the movies it always looked fairly simple, jumping from a moving car ...

He must have read her mind.

"If you try running, I'll catch you," the big man growled. "And we'll just play *harder* when we get where we're going."

Karen bit her fingernail again and ran the bloodied tip across the upholstered back of the driver's seat. What else could she do? How could Matt trace a *car*, follow a cold scent across Manhattan to wherever the Cutter was taking them? He'd look on the West Side first; that was where the Cutter had been active. She put her head up enough to see where they were going, and her heart fell. They'd turned *east*. By the time Matt finished searching the West Side, she could be dead. Unless she could give him a sign.

She slid off one of her shoes and dabbed at it with her bloody nail-bed. Thank God it was a plain flat sandal, nothing big and clunky.

She sat up, croaking. "I need some air. Please, I'm going to be sick."

The Cutter laughed. He was driving one-handed, the other arm stretched across the back of the driver's seat. "Doesn't matter to me—isn't my car. I'll turn on the A/C if you like."

Karen shook her head. "Fresh air. Window."

He laughed again. It was an ugly, angry sound. "I'm not stupid. You try to jump—"

She made herself sound desperate; that wasn't hard to do. "Just crack the window an inch, please. Or I'm going to be sick all over you and the upholstery, and you can deal

with the stench. What are you gonna do, kill me? Look, just crack the window, okay?"

The big man shifted his free hand to the steering wheel and pushed the button for the rear window. It slid down three inches. "That's it," he said. "That counts as your last wish. If you want to make a statement—I don't want to hear it." He laughed as if his comment was funny.

Karen didn't care. The window opening was plenty wide enough for her shoe.

He went back to driving one-handed, humming a little. Karen slid the shoe out the window, let it go. The noise it made slapping the ground was lost behind them.

Come on, Matt. I'm doing the best I can. She looked out the window for a moment. Second Avenue, upper Forties. She slipped off the other shoe. Almost absently, she began to hum too. The anthem from *Henry V*, the *Non Nobis* hymn. Give Matt a sound to follow, but nothing too loud, too obvious for her kidnapper to fix on. She slid the second shoe out the window and lay down once more.

She didn't look out again until the car came to a stop. Lying in the dark, Karen tried to do what Matt did every moment of the day: figure out the world with her senses. It was dark, where they were, but there was a lazy hum of traffic very near by. Overhead? And a smell of ... what? River?

East River. They were near the FDR Drive. *God, Matt, if ever you could hear what I was thinking, now would be a good time. East Side, mid-forties, under the FDR.*

The rear passenger's door jerked open so suddenly Karen's head dropped and she hit her forehead on the footboard painfully. The Cutter reached in with one hand and dragged her out of the car and onto her feet. If he noticed that she was barefoot, it didn't seem to matter to him.

"Come on, Radio-Girl," the Cutter said. He had his arm around her throat again and was dragging her toward a

one-story brick maintenance shed tucked just beyond the highway, fronting the East River.

She bit her nail-bed one more time, reached out and marked the car, then another signpost, then the grimy brick wall of the shed, before the Cutter yanked the door open and shoved her inside.

The smudge of blood was pretty fresh; they had not left the apartment long ago. Daredevil swung easily down the stairs and found another smudge by the front door, and then one more on a street sign. Then nothing.

Think.

The bloodied sign was right by an empty parking space. No parking space stayed empty in New York unless it was cordoned off—or vacated in the middle of the night. Big space, too. Large car. The Cutter was a big enough man to need a good-sized car with lots of headroom.

Great. A big car, speeding through the streets with Karen in it, and how the hell was he going to find it?

Daredevil stood for a moment, poised to listen, to smell. It was just past 1:25, and the city's noise had dulled to a quiet thrum, punctuated by a distant laugh, a siren's howl, or the eerie wail of an MTA bus's brakes. Listen through all that. Listen for Karen.

He thought he heard something. Grasping at straws, he broke open his billy club and cast the grappling cord out, swinging up onto a fire escape, then further up, to the rooftop. Heading east, toward what he hoped was Karen's voice. East and downtown.

Five blocks from the apartment, he found her sandal. He would have known it was hers from the scent that clung to it, but she'd left a message on it too, written in scrapes of blood: *East.*

Daredevil cast the shoe aside and vaulted onto the roof of a passing cab, moving with such urgency that he almost tumbled off the other side. Only his own superbly trained

instincts stopped him; he lay flat on the roof of the cab, listening.

At First Avenue, the cab pulled over to discharge the fare. Daredevil looked for another ride. No cars in sight. Time to try another approach. He jumped down by the driver's window just as the man was tucking the fare into his pocket. The bleary-eyed passenger who had just got out of the cab didn't even turn to see what was going on, just scuttled into his building. The cabbie's look of alarm changed to puzzlement when he saw Daredevil.

"Sir, I need your help," Daredevil said in what he hoped was an upbeat, persuasive, TV-super hero tone. "Can you drive me downtown?"

The driver, a graying man with the unhealthy pallor of a night worker, eyed him. "You can pay?"

"I'll have to owe you, but give me your medallion number and address, and you'll have the money tomorrow. With a twenty for your trouble."

The driver thought about that for a second. "My kid would kill me I didn't give you the ride," he said. "But you *better* send the fare. Where to?"

Daredevil jumped back up on top of the cab. "Down First. I'll let you know where."

Four minutes later, the cab stopped on 49th Street, across from the FDR.

"You sure about this?" the driver asked. "Fare is three-twenty."

"If I don't come out in two minutes, call 911." Daredevil was off the roof and across the street before the sentence was finished. A big Mercedes was parked under the highway; Karen had marked it, and a post, and the wall of the small brick building nearby, with traces of blood. The scent of blood from inside the shed was stronger, but she was still humming, raggedly.

Stay alive, Karen. I'm here.

The Cutter had tied her hands together, looping the cord around a vent on the roof of the maintenance shed. Karen kept humming: *Non Nobis, Domine, Domine. Sed Nomini, Sed ...*

She couldn't remember all the lyrics—it was like Matt to remember them, though. And as long as she focused on the song, on Matt coming for her, she could pretend to ignore the Cutter. He was talking about knives.

"This is a classic Bowie. Handmade, twelve-inch blade. Some people think the optimum length for the blade is ten inches, but I'm big, I can handle the extra length. 440C steel, black epoxy finish. I keep it very sharp." His voice was pleasant, low-pitched, informative. "Do you know what happens when a knife slices into living muscle? The muscle contracts around the blade. You feel a kind of tug as you're pulling through. As if the muscle was trying to stop the blade from doing any more damage. But of course, it can't."

She saw his smile, very white against the black of his mask, glittering in the lights from the highway above them.

Non Nobis, Domine, Domine. Non Nobis, Domine ...

The Cutter drew the tip of the Bowie without pressure across Karen's stomach, then down across her hip and over her thigh.

Without warning, he sliced shallowly into her thigh. "Time to play," he said.

Karen screamed.

Daredevil was on the roof before the scream could die away. "Drop the knife—get away from her!" he ordered.

The Cutter looked up from his victim, disoriented, like someone recalled from a dream. "You're not supposed to be here," he growled.

"The lady sent me an invitation," Daredevil said. "Of course, if you have a problem with that ..."

The Cutter had recovered, and sprang at the vigilante before he could finish the sentence. Daredevil easily deflected the Bowie—he could sense the steel blade

slashing toward him—but as had happened before, his sensory impression of the Cutter himself was weirdly off. For a moment it almost seemed as though *Karen* were coming at him with the knife.

Not possible. He sidestepped the attack, pivoted around on one toe and aimed a high-flying kick at the Cutter's head, but caught only the tip of the big man's ear.

The Cutter shook his head, as if to clear a ringing in his ears. Then he came at Daredevil again, slicing upward with the Bowie. The vigilante dropped under the knife, drew out his billy club with one smooth motion, and swept it up in a long arc, knocking the Bowie out of the Cutter's hand and sending it flying across the roof to clatter in a corner.

Then he remembered: mistake. The easiest thing to track about his opponent was the knife. Now Daredevil was having trouble sensing exactly where the big man was. Up close, his radar sense kicked in and told him where the Cutter was. More than a couple of feet away, and this sense weakened. Normally, hearing and touch—the sound of the Cutter's heartbeat and respiration, and the heat he gave off, the warmth conveyed by the blood pulsing to his fingertips—would have told Daredevil exactly where to strike. But not now. Not with the Cutter.

As he flipped backward, lashing out with a kick where he thought the Cutter's knees must be, he heard the thin wail of sirens and the protesting whine of tires cornering too fast. The cabbie had called the cops.

The kick hadn't connected, but he still stood between the Cutter and his knife. Made it harder to draw a bead on the bad guy, but a lot safer in the long run, he thought. As the Cutter moved around in front of him, Daredevil again had the weird sense that it was Karen who stood before him—but he could sense Karen across the roof, breathing raggedly, keeping silent so he could concentrate on fighting with her assailant.

On the street below, the first of the police cars screeched to a stop. Three others were wailing in behind. Two uniformed cops—he could sense their heartbeats and the rayon-serge blend of their uniforms—got out of the car and ran toward the shed.

“The party’s about to become a lot more crowded,” the vigilante said. “You want to do the graceful thing and go downstairs to the cops on your own?”

As a reply, the Cutter tackled Daredevil headfirst, knocking him to the ground. The blow came as just enough of a surprise so that he let the Cutter gain his feet again, but Daredevil rolled to his feet, too. He swept out again with his billy club, letting the club extend his reach until he felt its impact against flesh.

The big man grunted but stayed standing.

“What are you, Iron Man?” Daredevil muttered. The Cutter laughed, low.

Behind him, the hero heard the first wave of cops banging on the door to the roof, trying to break through. He could sense their positions, and the cold metal of the steel-clad roof, which was not going to yield easily. He could sense Karen, tension in every muscle of her body, propped against the inner wall of the roof’s low parapet. And then that fuzzy, weird shadow which buzzed around before him, almost *was* him. The Cutter.

It hit him: it *wasn’t* his senses, it *wasn’t* the rest of the world. It was the Cutter himself. Something about the big man kept Daredevil from getting a fix on him. His heartbeat mimicked Daredevil’s own, as a moment before it had echoed Karen’s. Even the radial pulse at his wrist, digital pulse from fingertips and toes, sounded like Daredevil’s own. *I was getting him confused with myself when we fought*, he marveled. *Okay, time to try a new strategy.*

For a long moment he stood still, poised and listening. Karen’s ragged breath on the far side of roof; the clamor as the police tried to break through the door; the lap of the

River weaving into the hum of cars passing overhead on the FDR.

Listen through it.

There was a flutter. The Cutter's heart rate was mimicking his own, but there was something different to it, a sigh as blood moved through a tight aperture in the heart a little too quickly, a whisper as the tide reversed and the blood returned to the heart that beat like Daredevil's. Something he could track.

We'll get you to a cardiovascular specialist at Ryker's, pal. You've got yourself a handsome little heart murmur. Had he really been so disoriented by the Cutter's dopplering heartbeat that he simply hadn't heard the murmur? Had he really been so afraid that his senses were betraying him that he hadn't listened through the noise? *That was almost the first thing Stick taught me. Listen past my feelings. Man Without Fear, my—*

"Come on and fight, Long Johns," the Cutter yelled. "When I'm done with you, I have a few things to say to Radio-Girl here." Without his knife, the big man was crouched in a wrestler's posture, poised to take Daredevil with his bare hands.

Aiming for that whisper of sound, Daredevil somersaulted forward, coming up to the big man with a punch that landed squarely in his gut.

Gotcha.

The Cutter coughed, lurched backward, but stayed on his feet.

Okay, so I can find you, but you're still made of spun adamantium or something. Why didn't that punch flatten you?

Daredevil's astonishment had given the big man time to regain his balance; now the Cutter lurched forward, reaching for Daredevil with both hands. His fingertips brushing the hero's shoulders as he danced away.

The Cutter growled and made a sweep with his arm, as if he'd forgotten he did not have his knife. Daredevil swept a kick upward into the man's ribs, and heard bone break. The Cutter folded forward, grabbing at Daredevil's leg as he fell, and the two men crashed to the ground, the Cutter stretched on top of Daredevil's legs. In the moment it took for both men to scramble to their knees, the Cutter crashed forward to knock Daredevil down again, a move with no grace, no skill, just ugly desperation.

He lay, almost straddling the hero, pinning Daredevil's legs with the weight of his own. Whatever the big man lacked in finesse or training, he had in bulk, the sheer iron weight of his muscles. He grabbed Daredevil's jaw and started pushing, forcing the hero's head back into the soft-tar shingle of the roof.

Daredevil spread his arms wide, then drove both elbows into the Cutter's head. The big man howled and rolled away, stumbled to his feet and shook his head angrily, like a furious bull. Now certain of where his adversary was, Daredevil rolled to his feet, too. At the same moment he heard the cops breaking the lock on the door to the roof, he realized that the Cutter had gotten past him, reached his knife. The Bowie moved like a slash of ice through the June air, and the Cutter threw himself backward at the door, slamming it closed, pushing the cops back into the stairway. Daredevil heard bodies falling on stairs.

Time to get this over with.

Daredevil went into an easy crouch, tracking the knife as it wove through the night breeze. The Cutter started to sidle to the left and Daredevil matched his movements in the classic circledance of a knife fight. The Cutter stepped left again, then leapt forward, straight at Daredevil. The man in red spun to one side, avoiding the attack, then realized the Cutter's real goal. He was standing over Karen with the knife.

She screamed.

Before she could gasp for another breath, Daredevil was beside her, and the Cutter was on the edge of the low wall, looking down at the River below.

"See ya," he growled. And jumped.

The smell of Karen's blood overpowered everything for a moment. The Cutter had slashed shallowly across her torso and into her left arm, slicing into the brachial artery in one fast stroke. Daredevil could hear the pulse of blood spurting from the wound as he closed his hand around her arm, thumb over the artery. Behind him, the roof door splintered open again. He did not turn his head.

"Get an ambulance!"

The flow of blood was slowing, stopped by the pressure; he could hear it. The Cutter was getting away, but Karen wasn't bleeding her life out.

The uniformed cops swarmed over the roof, assessing the situation; one was already calling for paramedics, others looking over the wall into the shadows, trying to make out some sign of the Cutter's escape.

Karen whispered something. He bent to hear her, and her lips brushed the fabric of his mask. "The cavalry," she said.

"Oh, yeah," he agreed bitterly.

She grinned crookedly. Her blouse was tattered and—to his delicate nostrils—stank of blood. There was an ugly cut on her leg, too. Her heart was beating strongly, a little fast. He kept his grip on her arm like a vise, and realized she was still humming the *Non Nobis* hymn.

She broke off. "What does that song *mean*?" she asked.

A little unsteadily, he told her. "It's one of the Psalms; I don't remember which one. Basically, it means no glory should be given to us, but to God alone."

"No wonder you like it—a very 'you' kind'a statement." She sighed. "Look, I'm going to close my eyes and rest for a while," she murmured. "Don't let anything exciting happen while I'm out, okay?"

And she fainted.

He stayed with her until the paramedics had applied a tourniquet, bandaged the other wounds, both fairly shallow, and loaded her into the ambulance to take her to the Empire State Medical Center, the nearest hospital. It was surreal, answering the questions the police fired at him—Hawkins and Drew were in the second wave of responding cops—while sitting with his hand clamped around Karen’s arm. The Cutter, the police said, had got past them somehow, got down to the water and away. They were tracing the Mercedes, but since it still had dealer’s tags on it, it might well be stolen. They doubted there would be much to go on from that.

It was after 2 A.M. when he got away and returned home. He called Foggy to tell him what had happened, showered the scent of blood off, and put the costume in a bucket in the closet to soak off Karen’s blood. When he was dressed, he headed off to the hospital.

The nursing staff were sympathetic, but insisted that Karen not be disturbed until morning. She’d lost a good deal of blood, and had required a lot of stitching up. She also had a mild concussion, and in slashing across her abdomen, the Cutter had nicked her stomach, making her treatment more than a stitch-and-go. She was on intravenous antibiotics and painkillers. From the attitude of the nurse on the floor, Karen had been admitted to, her case was nothing new, and not as bad as it could have been.

“Come back in the morning,” said the harried African-American nurse who filled him in on Karen’s status. When he shook his head, she sighed and took his arm to guide him down the hall to the visitor’s lounge. “These couches are *not* comfortable,” she warned him.

“It’s okay,” he told her. “You’ll wake me up if she wakes up?”

The police had put a man outside Karen's room, just in case. And he was in no shape to do anything, now that the adrenaline of the fight, and of his fear for her, had ebbed. Matt slumped down on a lumpy polyester sofa that smelled of a thousand midnight vigils like his own, and fell instantly to sleep.

At seven-thirty, as the morning bustle of the hospital picked up, he woke, called in a message to Jill Haupt's voice-mail at SNM to explain where he'd be, and why, and headed back up the hall to see Karen.

The morning shift nurses, who had not seen him come in the night before, clustered protectively around her room. Not visiting hours, had a terrible experience, can you come back later?

"I'll wait," he said softly. "As long as it takes." One of the nurses offered to guide him back to the waiting area, but a voice, thin but strong, followed him.

"Matthew!" Karen called. "Come back!"

He turned and was past the cop on guard, and in her room, so fast the nurse escorting him almost fell over. The nurse fluttered and the guard growled, but Karen, weak but firm, instructed them to go away.

"He's okay," she told the cop. To the nurse she said, "He's more competent than he looks. And he's probably been a little worried."

The nurse walked out of the room, clucking disapproval, as Matt settled gingerly on the edge of the bed.

"Just a little worried," he agreed.

"You look like hell," she told him. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Are you sure you're supposed to be scolding me in your weakened condition?"

He heard the soft slip of muscle in her cheek as she smiled. "I was just trying to distract you from telling me you were right about not pissing the Cutter off with the show."

Matt snorted. "I hadn't planned on scolding you about that until you were strong enough to fight back."

She sighed. "Thanks. You're a prince."

An orderly came in, fiddled with something, went out. No privacy. No time to promise her he was going to catch the Cutter, for her and for Siobhan Sealy and for everyone else he'd hurt. No time to tell her he'd figured out how to read the man, that his hypersenses were working fine, that everything was going to be okay, as long as she was okay.

"The Man Without Fear, huh?" Karen teased gently. "You looked a little edgy there, last night."

He leaned forward and kissed her very gently. "The Man Without Fear can face a dive off the Concorde into a damp paper cup without blinking ... but not the thought of life without you."

She smiled and closed her eyes. "You say the absolute perfect thing sometimes. You really do."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The opera had ran long—late in starting, and the music director had apparently restored every note normally cut from the score. The music was beautiful, of course, but while Rosalind Sharpe was prepared to sit through the beauty of *Turandot's* soaring arias, she hadn't Bernard Quayle's absorbed passion for the opera. She was glad when the music was done and they could leave Lincoln Center, heading for dinner at Le Perigord. And after dinner, since they were so nearby, it had seemed entirely reasonable to go back to Bernard's townhouse on Sutton Place for a cognac.

They were now on their second drink, and it was nearly 2:30 in the morning. It had been a long time, almost thirty years, since she had been in Bernard's house. Everything was as she remembered it, beautifully and expensively decorated, with pieces of good, expensive art. Bernard's taste was not particularly radical—Rosalind recalled that it had been Arthur Partido who had a passion for modern painting—but each piece was classic in the best sense of the word.

They sat in the study on the second floor, settled on the deep leather couch in a room lined with books. A large Frederick Remington bronze of a cowboy cantering on horseback stood on an end table, framed by the curtained window behind it. Four matched frames, arranged in two lines of two, hung between the windows; in them, the same chestnut horse cantered, galloped, bucked, and stood at rest. The artist was Stubbs, she remembered. Bernard had bought them while he and she were ... involved. He'd been enormously pleased with them in that dry, low-volume way. His study was still exquisitely tidy and orderly, tasteful and pleasantly masculine, maybe a little stuffy for Rosalind's taste.

There was, however, nothing stuffy about Bernard Quayle.

Rosalind had done her best to shine tonight in midnight-blue silk and diamonds, and Bernard had matched her effortlessly in black tie. He might be pushing 70, but he was still a handsome man. And charming, and entertaining. And powerful, and rich, which didn't hurt things at all.

So just how far did she want this date to go?

When they had been involved, when she was working for him just out of law school, things had been very different. Almost thirty years ago, he had been the boss and she the subordinate, slightly awed by her mentor. Nowadays, she reflected, that kind of relationship would have smacked of sexual harassment, but they had both benefited, and in the end they'd parted amicably. But now the playing field was more level: Rosalind was an adult, senior partner in an established and lucrative law practice, someone who called shots and pulled strings with the best of them. Perhaps she did not have the kind of power that Bernie Quayle did, but she certainly didn't need a mentor anymore.

Rosalind was aware of a pleasant buzz of possibility as she sipped her cognac. They talked about work, but were thinking of things less professional.

"So your partners are your estranged son and a blind man?" Bernard asked easily, making the question sound vaguely amusing. Even in the middle of the night with a drink in his hand and an attractive woman at his side, he could not resist trying to take the advantage, get the slight edge, Rosalind reflected.

"You could say that," she responded lightly. "Franklin's not estranged, really: we've been working together for some time. But he was raised by my ex, and the woman he married. I probably wouldn't have done a better job." She left no doubt that she would indeed have done a better job, had she been willing to do so.

"It's a complex process," Bernard agreed. "I had almost nothing to do with my children—in those days, the wife handled those details. But when Belinda's parents died, I

was forced to become involved. And I was, quite frankly, hoping to shape an heir for Q-P."

"And has the shaping worked?"

Bernard studied the cognac in his glass. "I think so. Sometimes I wonder." He looked back at Rosalind, smiling, turning the conversation back to her with a compliment. "I suppose your son has some of your brains?"

Rosalind nodded. "Enough for Columbia Law, which is where he met Matthew. Matthew's blindness turns out to be an excellent strategic advantage; almost everyone who goes up against him in court sees that white cane and underestimates him. I suppose you could say the same thing about my son's unprepossessing appearance," she added thoughtfully.

"No one as lovely as you could possibly—" Bernard began gallantly.

Then her cellphone, tucked in the tiny blue-beaded evening purse at her side, rang loudly. Both Rosalind and Bernard regarded the bag as if it might explode.

"Who in God's Middle Name is calling at this time of night? It must be—"

"Two-forty-one," Bernard supplied. "I don't suppose it could be a wrong number."

Rosalind smiled wolfishly and fished the phone out of her back. "If it is, they're going to be *deeply* sorry." She flipped the phone open and pressed the send button with one practiced movement, then put the phone to her ear. "This had better be extraordinarily good."

"Rosalind?" the voice at the other end of the phone sounded groggy and upset.

"Franklin." She put a world of sweet menace into the two syllables. "Why are you calling me at 2:41 in the morning?"

"I thought you should know ..." he began. And went on with bad news, almost the worst possible. Rosalind felt the

pleasant glow of the cognac, the building romantic mood, and the lateness of the hour, drain out of her.

"My God," she murmured. "What does he want us to do?" She listened for another few seconds. "Of course. Tell him not to worry. My God. All right. Yes, I'm glad you called."

She pressed the end button, flipped the phone closed, and looked at it uncomprehendingly.

"Rosalind?" Bernard said gently. "Is there a problem?"

She looked up at him, her face uncharacteristically defenseless, without the usual sardonic lift to her eyebrow and the sarcastic curl to her mouth.

"My partner's girlfriend was attacked by that man who's been cutting people up on the West Side. The Cutter. He kidnapped her from their apartment—God knows where Matthew was—and took her to some rooftop, my God, only a dozen blocks from here! And he ... hurt her."

Bernard's brows drew together in a frown of concern. "Is she all right?"

Rosalind's sardonic humor was reasserting itself. "As usual, Franklin was more emotional than factual—I don't know. He *did* say that she'd been taken to ESU Medical Center; I can call the hospital. Excuse me a moment?" She dialed information, got the main number for ESU Medical, and in a few minutes had worked her way through voice-mail to the news that Karen Page had been admitted, and that her condition was satisfactory.

"Thank God for that," she said, and dialed Matt's home number. After several rings she got Karen's voice on the machine and hung up immediately.

"I suppose Matthew has gone to the hospital. It's a mercy he wasn't in the apartment when the Cutter took Karen—he'd just have gotten killed." Rosalind leaned back into the pliant leather of the couch, feeling exhausted.

"Well," Bernard said lightly, "That's rather put paid to our festival atmosphere."

She nodded, grateful for his understanding. If anything could have ruined the moment they'd been building toward, this news was it. "I think I'd better go home," she said. "There'll be things to do in the morning, and the press to handle, too, I imagine."

Bernard offered to wake his driver and have her taken home, but she settled for having his valet, who was still awake, call for a car. Now that the mood of the evening had broken, she was utterly exhausted and happy to say good night with a chaste kiss on the cheek, and Bernard's murmured, "I'll call you in the morning." She barely remembered the ride back to her apartment, the doorman's respectful "good evening," as she swept in, or leaving the blue silk gown in a heap on the bedroom floor for the maid to pick up in the morning.

Bernard Quayle waited until he saw his valet hand Rosalind Sharpe into the car service sedan before he picked up the phone and dialed the number for his granddaughter's apartment.

"Belinda?" He kept his voice low and pleasant, with the hint of steel underneath that usually galvanized his staff into panicked action. "I need to talk with you immediately."

"What time is it?" she asked irritably. Belinda, as family, took his tone of command a little less seriously than he liked.

"It is time for us to have a talk, away from the office and away from your boyfriend." He gave the last word an unmistakably sarcastic twist.

"Grandfather, can't this wait until daylight? It's almost three o'clock."

"This cannot wait. Please be here by three-thirty, Belinda, if you expect to be in control of RenanTech at 8 A.M. Have I made myself clear?"

He hung up the phone without waiting for her response and went over to the cabinet to slide the doors that hid the

television aside. Local news would be running on Channel 1 all night. The assault on the woman—if he remembered correctly, she had some sort of radio show, and the media would have a field day with an attack on one of their own—would get a lot of play on the morning news programs. Might even make national news.

What an unspeakable mess.

At 3:21, he heard his granddaughter turning her key in the front door lock, and then her murmured conversation with his valet, Grundig, who met her in the hall and directed her to the study. She was wearing blue jeans and a sleeveless jersey, with a motorcycle jacket over all. It all made her look tough, unusually muscular, her face puffy above the leather collar. A very unattractive look, he thought; she knew he preferred to see his heir in more feminine, less casual clothes. So she was in a mood to challenge him, was she? He would take care of that in short order.

Belinda pushed a lock of blonde hair out of her eyes.

“You wanted to talk, Grandfather?” She yawned widely.

“Sit down. There’s a news item I think we need to discuss.” He sat down on the couch and gestured for her to sit also. Then he sat with his whole attention trained on the television screen while Belinda fidgeted irritably. They waited through a commercial for a local carpet cleaning firm, a channel ID, and the local weather, before the top stories of the half-hour came on.

“Radio personality Paige Angel was attacked tonight by the knife-wielding killer the police are calling the Cutter,” the news reader announced. “Karen Page, who broadcasts on WFSK as Paige Angel, was abducted from her West Side apartment shortly after 1 A.M., and was taken to a deserted area on the East Side by her assailant. She was only saved from death by the costumed vigilante Daredevil. Page is at the ESU Medical Center on the East Side, reportedly resting in satisfactory condition.” The report cut to a sound

bite of a police representative giving essentially the same information.

After a first flinch of shock, Bernard noted, his granddaughter had watched the rest of the report in concentrated silence. *Already weighing options, considering damage control ... and trying to figure out how to sweet-talk me out of taking over RenanTech. Well, my girl, if that's what you want, you're going to have to work for it.*

The news went on to the next story. Bernard clicked the TV off with the remote, and turned to his granddaughter. "I take it this little adventure was not something you knew about?" he asked coldly.

Belinda sighed theatrically. "Is this what you got me out of a sound sleep to talk about?"

"You're not stupid, Belinda. Don't act as if you were. This is a disaster for more reasons than I need state, and you should already know every one of them! When I said that I would remove you as RenanTech's CEO, I was quite serious. I'm going to need very compelling reasons not to close the whole operation down, take the loss, and get on with business."

Belinda's fair skin flushed. "Grandfather, you know I didn't tell David to do this."

"That is only one of the things that concerns me, my dear. I have told you repeatedly that you had to keep Wachtel under control, and yet he does *this*—and that attack on that Irish woman from the co-op last night. He risks exposure by fighting with one of those costumed *enforcers* who glut the city—what do you imagine would happen to RenanTech *and* Quayle-Partido if Daredevil had caught him and unmasked him?—and gives the same residents we are trying to drive out of the neighborhood a rallying point, a cause! Not to mention the news coverage this is going to generate."

Belinda clenched her jaw.

Good, keeping her temper under control. There's a skill she should teach her Neanderthal boyfriend, Bernard thought.

"The press will die down in a couple of days," she said at last. "No one cares about the people in Hell's Kitchen, Grandfather. As for Karen Whatzis—she's a magnet for trouble, it'll be easy to discredit her. Her radio station used to belong to Wilson Fisk; she has a history that was made for negative spin, and even—"

"None of that justifies being sliced up, in the eyes of the press, or most average citizens." he said flatly. "Use your brains, Belinda! My dear, this whole affair is beginning to take on a life of its own, and it's not a life that we control sufficiently. The idea was to have a few attacks by an unknown thug, which would add to a quality-of-life crisis in the Hell's Kitchen area and therefore render the notion of relocation more attractive to the residents of the neighborhood. Something quiet that could be taken as just an intensification of business-as-usual." Bernard stood and paced around the couch, ending up by the Remington bronze.

"Even when the press gave David a name—my God, as if he were Doctor Doom—the idea of a staged reign of terror might have worked. But such a thing must appear random: once David started attacking people who displeased him personally, the person on the street corner could say, 'Well, he's not going to come after me! I'm not important enough.'

"You and Wachtel are poisoning the land we want to sow for the *important* people. When we get West Haven Place built, who in God's name is going to want to live there? The whole neighborhood has been associated with a serial killer —"

"Grandfather!" Belinda sounded shocked.

"Do you have another name for what he is? He's killed two people, hurt at least three more, and are you sure

that's all there is to it? David Wachtel is a loose cannon and getting looser by the day. I, by God, want him brought under control now, or I will remove him, and *you*, from RenanTech immediately."

He had not raised his voice, but the steely venom in his voice was unmistakable. He waited for a sign of submission from his granddaughter.

Instead, she rose to her feet with a kind of swelling motion, as if she were growing taller and more powerful as she stood. She looked down at Bernard Quayle, and there was no hint of submission or fear or family feeling in her. She looked icy and monstrous.

"You won't touch me, Grandfather," she said coldly. "Or David. Or RenanTech. It would be a very, very bad idea to try it."

For a moment, Bernard was physically afraid. Was she going to *hit* him? She was young and in very good shape, and while he was taller than she, he was also, he realized with a sense of shock, *elderly*. She could hurt him. It had been so many years since anyone had threatened him physically that it took him aback. But his whole business life had been based on the principle that you never showed fear. When in doubt, attack first.

"Just what do you imagine you could do to me, Belinda? Injure me? What do you think that would accomplish?"

"I wouldn't have you judging every move I make, for one thing," she spat. "It gets real old, Grandfather. And believe me, I'm quite capable of doing what I have to. Don't think I'm not. How do you think Arthur Partido died?"

For a moment the book-lined room was deadly quiet, as grandfather and granddaughter watched each other across a divide of decades. Then Bernard began to laugh.

"My dear, did you really imagine I didn't know that you *helped* Arthur along? From the moment I took you into the firm you were eyeing his office like a hawk watching a sparrow. When Perdita Hampshire told me you were the

last one to see Arthur alive, I knew—although of course I would be fascinated to know the particulars.” He did not sound fascinated, but rather amused by the whole matter. “It really was time for Arthur to step down, one way or another. He was getting soft in his old age, more interested in sitting on the boards of arts foundations than in keeping Q-P strong. I watched you watching Arthur, and made that your proving ground. You got rid of him, so I put you in his place. But don’t for a moment think I’ll let you do the same to me. I will not let you jeopardize everything I have spent my lifetime building up.”

Belinda was still on her feet, looking down at him. When he finished, she turned away, walking along one wall, running her hand along the shelved books. When she spoke, her voice was as cool and dry as his.

“The way I see it, Grandfather, you don’t have a choice. I can deal with David; you can’t. Even if he does get out of control, I can get him back.” She held out one of her hands as if examining her manicure, then flexed it into a fist: once, twice, a third time. Had she always had such defined muscles in her arms? Bernard wondered. The pang of fear he’d felt earlier echoed in his gut. “Now, if you want to do something constructive, let’s sit down and talk about this little misstep of David’s calmly. I’m sure you’ll have some useful suggestions. After all, if RenanTech is implicated, as you pointed out, Quayle-Partido will go down with it. And I’m sure you’d hate that just as much as I would.”

By her tone, she was putting him out to pasture now, this minute. *Come along and make suggestions, Grampaw honey, and we’ll humor you.* Bernard Quayle had never been humored in his life. He didn’t intend to start now.

He stood up, buttoned his suit jacket and shook his head. “Since you don’t appear to take the repercussions of this attack on the Page woman very seriously, I think I’ll leave you to consider the *misstep* on your own. And Belinda? I would counsel you not to take any physical

action toward me, my dear. After Arthur's death, I wrote a lovely long letter that is now in the hands of my attorneys, directing them to investigate you if I should die of anything other than the most natural causes. I have no underlying health problems, dear, and I intend to live to a very ripe old age indeed. Now, it's close to 4 A.M., and I'm tired. David's ill-conceived attack on Ms. Page interrupted a very pleasant evening I was having with an old friend—another grievance to lay at his door."

He turned his back on her and left the study. In the front hall, Grundig snapped out of his doze and looked at his employer inquiringly.

"Give me ten minutes, Grundig. I need to do something." Quayle climbed the stairs to the third floor and his bedroom. He shut the door, sat down at the small writing desk by the window, and took out paper and pen. He had been bluffing about the letter to his attorney, but now he saw the sense in it. Only not, perhaps, a letter to the attorney who had drafted his will and been on his retainer for twenty-five years; he had a better idea. He had inadvertantly set it up in his chat with Rosalind an hour earlier. He began to write:

Dear Rosalind:

I am hoping you will never have to deal with so melodramatic a request, but I find myself situated so that I must ask it. If I should die by any other than completely natural means, would you please direct the police to inquire about the involvement of my granddaughter, Belinda ...

Belinda watched her grandfather leave the room in a rage so white-hot she could almost feel the tips of her fingers burning. For twenty years she had been dutiful and well mannered, polite, and interested as her grandfather weighed in with his opinions on everything from the way

she dressed to her form *en pointe* at ballet recitals. He had taught her a lot, it was true. He had also been brutally critical, belittling any effort of hers that did not meet his standards. So she'd met his standards, determined to prove herself so he would leave her alone.

She'd insisted on buying RenanTech because it was her chance for something of her own, something that could make her as big and unassailable as her grandfather was. She had done her research, a crash course in markets for small-demographic medications, FDA approvals, competitors, and RenanTech's potential profitability. She'd listened to what Carl Hauser and his partners had told her about the nanobug's potential, and maybe not listened as well to what they'd said about side effects. The Bug had turned out to be expensively far from FDA approval. She'd turned that lemon into lemonade by coming up with the West Haven Place project—using RenanTech's property as the basis for a sure-bet real estate project in the heart of Manhattan.

At every turn her grandfather had been there, judging her.

And she couldn't touch him. Not if he was serious about having written that stupid letter, like something out of an old Agatha Christie mystery or something.

Her mind returned to tonight's disaster. David. What on earth had he been thinking, attacking that woman from the radio? It was one thing to go after that old witch from the residents' co-op—no one cared about her. But attacking a public figure? A celebrity?

She picked up the phone and punched out the number for David's apartment. No answer, just the machine, which meant he was probably on his way to her apartment. She didn't leave a message, just slammed the phone down in the receiver. If anything, she was angrier than she'd been five minutes before. She had to think of a way to pull this whole mess out of the fire: her grandfather was right, the

morning news would be going insane about this attack, and if they talked to the wrong people someone might come snooping around RenanTech, and though they couldn't prove anything it would be trouble for the company and for West Haven Place.

She had another panicked thought: *My God, what if David talks to the press? We'll never recover our credibility. He could sink West Haven in two sentences ...*

She felt alone, abandoned by her grandfather, who wouldn't help, and David, who was only making things worse. Always, *always* she wound up dealing with things herself, alone, abandoned and disappointed by the people who should have been there to help: her parents, her grandfather, even David. Everyone talked about being there for her, and no one, no one ever was. So she had to do it herself, always. Because no one else could be trusted.

Fury rose in Belinda until she could taste it. In her rage, she reached out for something to express her fury, took hold of the Remington bronze, two-hundred pounds if it weighed an ounce, hefted it in both hands, and pitched it through the screen of the television set.

Well, at least the Bug is working, she thought, looking at the damage she'd done.

Then she turned on her heel and stalked out of the study.

He let his valet take his clothes, hand him his pajamas and robe, and vanish discreetly to polish his shoes and brush and hang his suit. Then Bernard Quayle lay back on his bed with a long, shuddering sigh. It was late, or early, perhaps. He was bone tired and hoped that he would be able to fall asleep at once, but that did not happen. His mind kept turning over routes of action, tactics that would solve some or all of the problems that had been created tonight by the Cutter's attack on Karen Page. Factor in David Wachtel's growing unpredictability and fondness for

violence, and his own granddaughter's volatility, and Bernard had a great deal to consider.

He closed his eyes and let his mind drift, considering first how to handle the press. He was imagining a press conference to announce the beginning of construction on West Haven Place, and reporters querying him about the dangers of the neighborhood—

—and there was a sudden crash from downstairs, loud enough that he could hear the chime of breaking glass and the clang of metal.

Grundig, in his own dressing gown, appeared groggily in the doorway to Bernard's bedroom. "Shall I go down and find out—" he began.

Bernard shook his head.

"I'm sure it was simply my granddaughter venting her anger, Grundig. I had to deliver a few home truths tonight, and I don't think she liked them. Clean up in the morning."

The servant nodded and went back to his own room.

Bernard went back to his thoughts. There had to be a way to control his granddaughter and David Wachtel without implicating himself. Optimally, without losing Q-P's considerable stake in RenanTech. The company itself, if it continued working quietly on the nanotechnology, might yet get past the side effects that had made it ineligible for FDA testing and turn a decent profit; Belinda had been right about that. But he had to consider the idea that Quayle-Partido would take a hit, have to sacrifice the investment in RenanTech and go on.

First, to devise a plan to contain the damage the Cutter had done, and to minimize damage to the future of West Haven. Second, devise a plan to contain Belinda and David. He could not match his granddaughter or her boyfriend for brute strength, but Bernard was not unarmed. He had tools, strategies he'd honed for years. Perhaps the thing to do was to cast family loyalty aside once and for all, admit that Belinda was a failed attempt to shape an heir worthy

of what he had created, and take back the whole project. Belinda would fight it, but Bernard had never backed away from a fight.

He would need help, and not the usual help, who might be tainted with some idea of loyalty to his granddaughter and the “new guard.”

Bernard looked at the clock at his bedside: 5:21.

Rosalind would understand. He dialed her number. She picked up on the fifth ring.

“Whoever you are—” she began ominously.

“Rosie, it’s Bernard. I apologize for calling at this hour. I trust you got home safely?”

There was a pause at the other end; collecting her thoughts and her temper, Bernard thought. When she spoke, she sounded smoothly cordial. “Yes, thank you, Bernard. It’s a little early. Is there some emergency?”

He had thought about how to put it. “In fact, dear, yes, there is. I was wondering if you and your partners could meet with me later in the morning—I realize that Mr. Murdock has had a traumatic night, and I wouldn’t ask it of you, and him, if I did not consider this to be vital. Perhaps eleven, to give you and him a chance to visit Miss ... Page, is it? Before meeting with me?”

Guardedly, Rosalind replied that she could not guarantee that Matt Murdock would be able to come. “But I think Franklin and I can clear our calendars for a brief meeting with *you*, Bernard. But can I ask what this is about? We’re not your regular house counsel—”

“No, and that’s exactly the point. I need advice from counsel with no prior ties to Q-P. I’ll explain it all at the meeting, Rosalind. Oh, and I would like to meet at the RenanTech offices. I believe Mr. Murdock has been there, but in case he is not able to come ...” He gave her the address.

They said good night again. Bernard hung up the phone and checked the clock again: 5:28. Which gave him five-

and-a-half hours to come up with a charge against his granddaughter that would convince Rosalind Sharpe and her partners to go to war on his behalf.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Matt Murdock had never liked hospitals. The accident that took his sight and heightened his senses had only crystallized that dislike. Hospitals were a riot of smells, most of them foul: chemicals, disinfectants, bodily fluids of all sorts and conditions, and blood, always blood and lots of it, until the smells backed up onto his tongue and he could taste them. Hospitals, always too hot or too cold. The stink of desperation clung to visitors and to patients, and the doctors and nurses ran on adrenaline and coffee that seeped through their pores. You were supposed to associate hospitals with healing, miraculous cures, birth, the saving of life. He wished he could think that way. For him, hospitals were about death, loss, grief. When he was told he'd never see again, he was sitting on the edge of a hospital examining table, listening to the soft sound of unwound bandages dropping onto the table's thin paper liner. When his father was killed, he was brought to a hospital morgue to ID the body—only to be told by some officious attendant that his ID wasn't valid because he was blind.

Here he was in a hospital again.

Matt had caught a little sleep in the visitor's chair in Karen's room before the nursing staff kicked him out so that they could go through their morning clean-and-torment routine. He was sitting outside the room in the chair the guard had vacated to take a bathroom break, when Rosalind and Foggy appeared.

"They're changing her bandages," Matt told them.

"My God, Matthew, you look like hell," Rosalind said. "Though I see that shiner of yours is almost gone. How did you get it, anyway?"

"Um, Rosalind, this might not be the best time—" Foggy began.

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"Nah, it's okay, Foggy. I'm sure Rosalind means it in the nicest possible way. I walked into a door, Rosalind. We blind

people do these things.” Matt didn’t bother to hide the sarcasm. To his surprise, he heard the muscle slip in her cheek, and sensed the faint gleam of her teeth as she smiled.

“Matthew, I never know whether you’re as clumsy as you seem, or just playing a very, very crafty part. Well, *you’re* not dead yet. How’s Karen?”

“Mo-ther!” Matt could feel Foggy’s anguished slouch, the *can’t take her anywhere* posture he went into when Rosalind was acting particularly outrageous.

“Karen’s not dead yet either, thanks. Slashed up, mildly concussed, and some blood loss. But they stopped the Cutter in time, and got the bleeding under control.” He kept his voice measured and calm, but clenched his hands at the memory of Daredevil’s gloves, slippery with Karen’s blood.

Rosalind surprised him again—he could hear her heartbeat slow as tension eased out of her. She’d really been worried, he realized. He knew she liked Karen, but somehow it was a shock to know his partner was having such a ... human reaction. For a moment he wanted to hug her. Just for a moment, though. Then she used up all that credit by asking him why he wasn’t dressed for work.

“Because I’ve been here since three in the morning, Rosalind.”

“And that’s commendable, Matthew. But we have a meeting this morning, at RenanTech.”

It was probably the only thing that would have whetted Matt’s curiosity at that moment. Waiting while the attending finished rebandaging Karen and checking her sutures, he had been thinking again about the Cutter, about Louis Bastuto and Siobhan Sealy and RenanTech, and if there was a way that all of them came together. He’d been facing off with criminals too long, both as Daredevil and as a lawyer, not to trust his gut instincts in such things. There was a connection, he just wasn’t getting it yet.

"Is this your solution to Louis Bastuto's problem?" he asked.

Silence. *She's forgotten who Louis Bastuto is*, Matt realized with chagrin. *She's vamping.*

"It's something big, and yes, in the long run I think it will benefit your client. Now, once those ghouls get done mummifying Karen, I want to say 'Hi,' and you'll want to say 'Bye' before you go home and change and—" she paused to sniff delicately, "—and shave and shower first, I think. We're due at RenanTech at eleven."

Matt's curiosity was directly at war with his desire to stay with Karen—and his irritation with his senior partner. Did Rosalind deliberately do things in a way guaranteed to make him want to kill her? As he was about to open his mouth to tell her to go to hell, a nurse stuck her head out of the room.

"Mr. Murdock? We're done, and she's asking for you."

Matt let Rosalind and Foggy lead him into the room. An orderly was plumping pillows for Karen's roommate on the far side of the room, and a nurse was gathering up lengths of bandage daubed with blood, Betadyne solution and antibiotic ointment. His nose wrinkled slightly at the smell.

"Wow, you brought a party," Karen said.

Rosalind sat down firmly on the side of Karen's bed and took one of her hands. Matt could detect Karen's wince of pain as the bed shook under her. "Karen, sweet, I am so glad you're okay! Listen, we've got to spirit Matthew away for a few hours, can you spare him? Thanks, love!" She rose to her feet and Matt felt Karen flinch again, heard the tiny subvocalized noise of discomfort as the mattress shifted under her again.

I have to get Rosalind out of here before she kills Karen with kindness.

"Actually, I was hoping he'd go home and get some sleep," Karen protested.

“Oh, he will, but right after this meeting. It’s really crucial to Louis Bastuto’s case,” Rosalind said brightly. Not for the first time, Matt considered that any mayhem he wrought on Rosalind Sharpe would, in a better world, be ruled justifiable. “Franklin, say hello to Karen, and then the three of us really have to go. All right, love?” Rosalind bent and pressed her cheek against Karen’s. “We’ll see you later.” She waved and left the room.

“Hurricane Rosalind,” Foggy observed with distress. He stepped gingerly to the side of Karen’s bed and bent to kiss her gently. His body was a solid block of warmth in the over-air conditioned room. “I’ll make sure Matt doesn’t wear himself out, Karen. You just concentrate on getting well, okay?”

Karen nodded. She pulled Foggy closer and murmured something in his ear; she must have known Matt would hear it, there was no such thing as a whisper too low for him to pick up. “Make sure the hornhead doesn’t wear himself out either, okay?”

Foggy nodded, stepped back, and pushed Matt toward the bed with an awkward *one-of-the-guys* sort of shove. “I’ll be outside with The Primal Force Which Is My Mother,” he said. “Kiss the girl, Matt.”

Gently, and very carefully, Matt did just that.

Somehow, with Rosalind propelling him, Matt managed to get showered and shaved and dressed in a miraculously short time. She and Foggy had brought him back to the apartment, and Rosalind’s only comment, as she looked at the mess, was, “No wonder you wanted to sleep at the hospital.” His landlady had left him a note, which Foggy read to him, in which she apologized for the chaos: the police had sent a crime scene team early in the morning to survey the wreck the Cutter had made of the apartment. The police hadn’t helped any: there were papers and furniture everywhere, and Matt could detect the smell of

fingerprint powder all over the living room and bedroom. While Rosalind sat fastidiously on a stool in the kitchen, Foggy began righting the furniture and picking up books.

When Matt reappeared in the living room, dressed and fastening his tie, Rosalind looked him over, nixed the tie, and went into the bedroom to find another.

It must be tied to the chromosomes, Matt thought. Some elusive girl thing about ties.

At five minutes past eleven, Rosalind, Foggy, and Matt were clustered in the center of RenanTech's lobby. Two days earlier, the reception area at RenanTech had seemed small to Matt. Today, with all of them standing by the receptionist's desk, it was downright cramped. The receptionist seemed unnerved by the imposing crowd of sharply dressed attorneys who stood before her, and doubly nonplused when Rosalind asked for Bernard Quayle.

"Mr. Quayle?" she squawked. Her flat Queens vowels might have made her sound more confused than she was, but Matt doubted it: her heartbeat was fast, her skin flushed. "You don't mean Ms. Quayle?" When Rosalind nodded firmly in the negative, she murmured, "I'll have to call someone—" She fumbled, pressing keys on the switchboard, disconnecting them, trying again.

"Deborah? It's Lorena. Um, someone is here for Mr. Quayle; could they be ... no, it's ... yeah. They're *lawyers*. There *is*? He *is*? Well, they're here. Uh, okay." She hung up the phone, sounding no happier than before. "Um, Mr. Quayle's in the conference room. He's waiting for you. Um."

Rosalind leaned forward and said in a voice like frozen glass, "It's all right, dear. You don't need to understand it, you just need to tell us where the conference room is."

The receptionist made a small panicked noise as the door behind her opened.

"Ms. Sharpe? I'm Deborah Mann; I'll bring you in to the conference room." Matt recognized the voice: it was the

same woman who had directed him to Belinda Quayle's office two days ago. Without waiting for a response, Ms. Mann turned to lead them down the narrow hall.

As they went down the narrow hall, Matt asked, "Is Ms. Quayle here today?"

He felt Mann's shoulders tighten at Belinda's name. Belinda had her staff's flinch-meter cranked way up high, and there was something going on here that they were sure she wouldn't like. *Very* interesting.

"Ms. Quayle and Mr. Wachtel have a meeting off-site," the woman answered tersely, then shut her mouth with an audible click. For a moment there was only the electric brush of their shoes on the nylon carpet, then Mann stopped before an open door. "Here you are," she said, and had disappeared before anyone could say thank you.

The conference room, like Belinda's office, was a complete contrast to the no-frills nylon pile and catalog furniture of the reception area. The carpet was softer underfoot, without the chemical tang of nylon, and the oval table in the room's center was of real wood, not laminate. The room smelled of lemon oil, wool, a spicy masculine cologne sparingly applied, and coffee. Seated at the far end of the oval, with a carafe, cups and saucers at his elbow, was an elderly man. There were two doors behind him, one to the right, one to the left. Both of them were closed.

"Rosie! Come in and introduce me to your associates."

Bernard Quayle's voice was dry and resonant, with a slight New England accent and a thin veneer of cordiality. He offered them coffee, which all three lawyers took gratefully: Matt's black, Foggy's with three sugars, and Rosalind's light and unsweetened.

"Rosie told me your lady-friend was attacked last night. I hope she is recovering," Quayle spoke to Matt in the slightly too-loud voice some people use when abroad—or with the blind. As if yelling would get the point across.

“She’s doing as well as can be expected, Mr. Quayle. If I might ask—”

Rosalind broke in smoothly. “Bernard, I think we’re all very curious to know what was so important that you had to call me at five-thirty in the morning to arrange this meeting.”

“I should note, Mr. Quayle, that as counsel to Louis Bastuto, I’m only here in an advisory capacity,” Matt began. “The conflict of interest—”

Quayle waved a hand, a gesture he could not have expected a blind man to catch. “Mr. Murdock, I can assure you that this meeting will only be to your client’s benefit. The action taken against him by RenanTech was not approved by me, or by Quayle-Partido.”

Foggy spoke up. “Even so, Mr. Quayle, the appearance of conflict of interest could muddy the legal waters at a later time. So for today, at least, Mr. Murdock and I are only here to advise our partner ...” his voice wound down. From the shift in pitch Matt heard in his friend’s voice, he was reasonably sure that Rosalind was looking daggers at Foggy, either for saying a qualified no to Bernard Quayle, or for implying that she might ever, ever need the advice of her junior partners.

Quayle’s chair creaked as he leaned back in it, took a sip of his coffee, shook his head regretfully. *A nice theatrical pause*, Matt thought. As a matter of fact, most of the old man’s movements seemed a little stagey, including this pose of thoughtful consideration. A manipulator, just like his granddaughter. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. I know you’re aware that Quayle-Partido is the owner of RenanTech. You know, and I believe Mr. Murdock knows, Rosie, that my granddaughter Belinda is the CEO of RenanTech, in addition to being a partner in Q-P. Some problems have arisen which will necessitate my removing Belinda from her position here, and quite possibly from her partnership at Q-P as well. I called you in because I cannot

be sure that she has not tainted the loyalty of my usual counsel—”

“—and you’re reasonably certain of my loyalty,” Rosalind finished. She sounded amused.

There was more, Matt thought. The old man’s respiration and heart rate were nearly within normal ranges, but he was moving his head slightly, looking from Matt to Foggy to Rosalind over and over again. Making sure they were with him. He was telling his story his way, but he was also holding something back, something that made him anxious. Maybe he was afraid to tell it all for fear that SNM would back out, Matt thought. In any case, he could tell that Quayle’s attitude of relaxed authority was only an act. So what was the problem?

Quayle was getting to it. “I believe that Belinda is under the influence of an experimental genetic therapy developed by RenanTech, and that it has caused her to become erratic and unreliable. It pains me to say it, but I think she is dangerous to herself, and certainly to this company. I need her removed immediately, and with as little media exposure as possible—particularly because I have hopes that the therapy, when properly refined and tested, will be successful, benefit thousands of people—and bring in a substantial profit to Quayle-Partido.”

Foggy sat up straighter in his chair, clearly intrigued at the legal mess Quayle was presenting to them. “What sort of danger, Mr. Quayle? Is this instability something that a psychiatric expert could attest to?”

And, “Why would your granddaughter be using this therapy?” Rosalind asked.

Quayle answered Foggy’s question first. “Belinda has become paranoid, possibly delusional. She’s convinced that the people in this neighborhood have targeted her, and RenanTech, for some sort of attack. That sort of thing.”

Listening to the old man’s heart speed, Matt knew that he would keep interviewing shrinks until he found one who

would sing his tune. For a moment he felt sorry for Belinda.

"I hate to expose my granddaughter to a public scrutiny of her behavior," Quayle added. "Would a psychiatric witness really be necessary?"

"Probably. What are the terms of her contract with RenanTech?" Foggy asked. He was scratching notes on the screen of his Palm Pilot.

"She has no contract with RenanTech, actually. CEO at the will of the parent company. The problem being, of course, that Q-P is the parent company, and that she is the junior partner. And there, she does have a contract."

"I'd have to see the corporation's by-laws," Foggy started.

There was a commotion in the hall, muffled by the wood-paneled walls. Matt heard Belinda Quayle snarling at Mann as she stalked down the hall to the conference room. At the sound of her voice, the hair on the back of his neck bristled. Of all the complications he did not need this morning, dealing with his automatic response to Belinda was high on the list.

The door to the hallway slammed open. "You are *not* doing this, Grandfather!" Belinda Quayle barked.

Matt sat bolt upright.

Belinda stood in the doorway, arms akimbo and feet planted wide apart, as if she were making a barrier that would contain the trouble in the conference room. Behind her, wearing a business suit and tie, his shoes smelling of fresh polish, was a man with a strange, irregular heartbeat. A heartbeat that mimicked that of the person nearest him—Belinda, at the moment. A heartbeat with a murmur Daredevil had detected the other night.

The heartbeat that Matt knew belonged to the Cutter.

Matt suppressed his first impulse—to leap across the room and tackle the Cutter—but when he remembered Karen lying in her hospital bed it was not easy. Who was this guy?

“Belinda, David, come in and don’t make a scene,” Bernard Quayle said coolly.

Matt blinked. The massive, overly muscled man following Belinda Quayle into the room was David Wachtel, head of security for RenanTech. He had an eerie sense that things were falling into place, but he didn’t quite get it all yet. And this was not the place to try to capture the Cutter: enclosed space, lots of potential hostages, and himself there in the person of Matt Murdock, blind lawyer. He couldn’t exactly step into a phone booth and come back as Daredevil. But now he knew who the Cutter was. He could come back later, even call the police with a tip and let them handle it.

As long as things didn’t get out of control here.

Belinda seated herself across the table from the SNM lawyers, several seats away from her grandfather, as if disassociating herself from him. She still had that unsettling sensual pull, Matt noted, but it was changing. She smelled wrong in some way, as if her pheromones had gone sour in a really basic way. And something was happening to her physically, too. A few days ago, even, she had the body of a woman who trained heavily at the gym—slender, lithe, lightly muscled. Today, two days later, her silhouette was subtly different: her shoulders were broader, her waist narrower, her arms and legs bulky with muscle that had not been there before.

The Bug, Matt thought. *The old man was right*. What had Gregg D’Orazio said about the side effects? Fluctuations in autonomic functions. Like pheromone production. Or heart rhythms.

Wachtel, seated to Belinda’s left, leaned back in his chair and rocked slightly. His shoulders were so broad they covered the back of his chair; the collar of his shirt strained around his overly developed trapezius muscles. A few days ago Daredevil had not been able to pick up a scent trace on this man; today, he gave off an ugly smell of adrenaline and

hormones that made Matt's own muscles tense in response. Fight-scent. He was literally spoiling for a fight.

At Matt's side, blithely unaware of the danger she was courting, Rosalind Sharpe fired the first shot. "I don't think Mr.—Wachtel, is it?—needs to join us, do you?" she asked with steely politeness. "If you'd be so kind?" She tilted her head toward the door.

Wachtel smiled broadly. "I'll stay, thanks." A low, growling voice.

Opposition only increased Rosalind's combative instinct. She started listing the reasons why it would be preferable for Wachtel to leave, all in that steely *this-would-be-a-good-time-to-die* tone. Wachtel didn't like it. His heartbeat echoed Belinda's and both were fast, skipping with excitement. Matt could feel the situation spinning out of control and no one else in the room was aware of it. He had to do something; he could sense Wachtel beginning to shake in his eagerness to hurt someone.

Matt pulled a yellow pad in front of him and began scratching at it aimlessly with his fingernail, leaving light impressions in the paper. Then he shoved the pad over to Foggy, bouncing his finger over the scratches, hoping Foggy would take the hint and look down.

He heard Foggy's sudden, sharp intake of breath.

W. is Cutter, the scratches said.

Foggy began to doodle over the scratches, wiping them out.

"—nor are you an officer of either corporation, which would give you some standing in the matter—" By her tone, Rosalind was just getting warmed up.

"Um, Rosalind, perhaps we should just accept Mr. Wachtel's presence as a given, note that he's here under protest by Mr. Quayle, and move on." Foggy kept his tone even. Thank God, Matt thought, that he'd gotten the message. *Don't antagonize the big guy right now.*

Rosalind wasn't interested in being reasonable. "Franklin, remember that you're only here in an *advisory capacity*, please. We need to be clear on this point. This is a private meeting in which Miss Quayle may possibly have some place, but Mr. Wachtel has none. Now, if I—"

"Rosalind, in the interests of progress, I am *advising* you to go on with the meeting without regard to Mr. Wachtel's presence."

There was something in the tone of Foggy's voice that made their senior partner hesitate. Rosalind Sharpe frowned at her son. After a long moment, Matt heard her agree that perhaps, in the interests of time, it was better to proceed.

Unfortunately, Bernard Quayle had not gotten the same message. From the head of the table he cleared his throat and observed coolly that David Wachtel had no business in the room, period.

"How do you figure that, old man?" Wachtel growled. Matt cursed himself. Why hadn't he put the two voices—Wachtel's and the Cutter's—together before? Because sometimes you don't see—or hear—the thing you're not expecting. "I'm here at the request of the CEO of RenanTech." Wachtel leaned back in his chair again and smiled at Belinda. She ignored him, her attention entirely on her grandfather.

Matt felt like he was in the middle of one of those nightmares where everyone was passing around a ticking bomb. One USDA Choice-certified crazed killer in the room, *everyone* seemed determined to antagonize him, and at the moment there was nothing he could do about it but counsel caution.

"You are here at the request of the former CEO of RenanTech," Bernard Quayle said. "What my granddaughter wants is no longer the word of law here: as senior partner in the corporation which owns RenanTech, I

am removing Belinda from the board of the company and as Chief Executive."

"Grandfather, no!" Belinda Quayle stood up, quivering with outrage.

Bernard continued blandly, "As a matter of fact, my dear, yes. I am in charge here, David, and my very first executive task—and one that I am enjoying very much indeed—is to fire you. Effective immediately."

Wachtel stood up. His height and breadth made the simple movement a threat. "Reconsider. *Now.*"

Bernard's heart skipped a beat. His skin was clammy.

He knows, Matt thought. He knows Wachtel is the Cutter, and he knows that challenging him is dangerous, and if he knows, what do you bet Belinda knows?

Everything Louis Bastuto and Siobhan Sealy and Karen had suggested that he had shaken off as too paranoid to be true, *was* true: Bernard Quayle and his granddaughter had been using the Cutter to shake up the neighborhood and move people out. Conspiracy to commit murder. Accessories before and after the fact. Carl Hauser, Rick Gehry, Hassan Denges and Omar Glass, all dead; Siobhan Sealy and Karen saved from death. All for what?

"David, you are a good part of the reason why I'm taking this step," Bernard Quayle was saying. "Your erratic behavior, your inability to speak appropriately to people outside the company, make you a liability. Belinda said she could keep you under control. That has, regrettably, proved untrue."

Wachtel turned back to Belinda. "Control *me* ?" he asked. "Is that what you told him?"

"I had to get him off my back!" she snarled back. Now the two of them were squaring off. Belinda Quayle was a fairly tall woman, maybe five-nine, but she looked petite next to Wachtel. "And if you had a brain in your head and hadn't kept going off on your own—"

"To do the job *you* wanted done!" Wachtel barked back.

Rosalind rapped sharply on the table. "Both of you stop this," she said coldly. "You sound like a couple of children."

Wachtel ignored her. "It's *our* company, and if Grampaw over there hadn't turned you against me—"

"Leave him out of it," Belinda snapped. "It's *my* company, David. Mine. Leave the old—"

Wachtel reached over, grasped the arm of the chair next to his, picked the chair up easily in one hand and swung it around to smash down in the center of the table. The impact was so hard the table buckled.

"I'll kill him! He's been trying to turn you against me, and you fell for it! I'll take care of him! He won't be able to—then I'll—"

Incoherent with rage, Wachtel lunged for Bernard Quayle, but Belinda got between them, pushing him back.

"*You're* not killing anyone, David," she said meaningfully. "Maybe Grandfather's right, and—"

That was too much for Wachtel. He swung one arm at her like a club. She ducked it with astonishing speed, came up to ram her shoulder into his chest and, while he was off balance, raked her fingernails across his face.

Wachtel screamed in rage.

The howl startled everyone in the room. Foggy Nelson, galvanized by Matt's scratched-out note as much as the chaotic family brawl that was breaking out before his eyes, was on his feet at once. He looked at Matt for a second, just to confirm what he already knew he had to do: get Rosalind and Bernard Quayle out of the room and leave room for Matt to deal with the two crazies who were shrieking at each other like participants in a staged cat fight.

He grabbed his mother's elbow and pulled her out of her chair. "Rosalind, I think we'd better get Bernard out of here." She didn't even give him an argument, just followed Foggy as they scrambled past the chairs toward the end of the table, where Bernard Quayle was still sitting,

apparently mesmerized by the confrontation between his granddaughter and David Wachtel.

"Bernard!" Rosalind said sharply. He looked up at her milky-eyed, uncomprehending. "We've got to get out of here and call the police. Or security—"

"Not security!" Quayle objected. "They're all David's men! They'll take his side!"

Rosalind put her hand under Bernard Quayle's arm and yanked him upward. "Franklin! Help me!" she barked at Foggy. More gently, to Quayle, "Belinda's holding her own right now. Let's get out."

And yes, when Foggy looked up, Belinda was pummeling the side of Wachtel's head with both fists while the big man swiped one-handed at her fists. He was reaching back for something—a floor lamp. If he threw it, someone was going to be hurt, probably a bystander. Foggy yanked his mother back to the right-hand door behind Quayle's seat. The knob turned, the door swung open, and he half-pushed, half-threw, Rosalind into the room beyond. Then he went back, grabbed Bernard Quayle as unceremoniously, pushed him into the room before him, and slammed the door shut.

"Oh, my God!" Rosalind cried. "Matthew! We've got to get him out of there!"

There was a crash in the conference room. All three of them stared at the door, trying to imagine what was happening in there. Yelling, but none of them could decipher the words.

"Franklin, you have to get Matthew!" Rosalind insisted.

"If I go in now, I'll only attract attention and endanger you," Foggy answered. Never much for exercise, he was panting from the exertion of getting Quayle and Rosalind out of the room, but he managed to sound calm and reasonable. He was rather proud of that, but it didn't seem to impress Rosalind. She'd been scared in there, Foggy realized, and now she was compensating, showing herself

she could still terrorize the small, the weak, the cowardly ... and her own flesh and blood.

"Franklin Nelson, get back in there and rescue your partner! If you think I'm going to let you hide in here while —" Rosalind was reaching around Foggy's portly frame, trying to open the door he was blocking. He put one hand on her shoulder and held her off. "Franklin, you mopey little—"

"Rosalind, *shut up!*" Foggy bellowed.

Rosalind closed her mouth hard and fast and stared up at her son.

"Matt was near the hall door, he will be out of the room by now."

"But he's *blind!*" Rosalind wailed, outraged.

"I know that! But he's not stupid, and he's more competent than you give him credit for, and, uh, he works out a lot. Look, I'll look in to see if he's okay, all right? But I want you and Mr. Quayle to stay back; there is no point in any of us getting hurt, and our first obligation has to be to our client." How many times had Rosalind said that? It felt good to turn that pet phrase back on her.

Foggy turned around and opened the door a crack, just enough to see that Belinda and Wachtel were still struggling—and that the room was a shambles. Matt said that Wachtel was the Cutter, and the big man had certainly acted crazy enough; how long could Belinda Quayle hold him off?

Come on, Matt, get Daredevil in there and chill things out.

"Close the door. Don't go back in there," Bernard Quayle said behind him. His voice was shaky; he sounded old and frightened. "You don't know how dangerous David is; the kind of things he's been doing—but I didn't know how frightening he was when he *was* ..." His voice faded out.

Foggy turned to look at the older man. *He knows*, Foggy realized. *And if he knew before this, and hasn't said*

anything to the police ...

"Cripes ..." he murmured. "No sight of Matt—he got out the other door."

"The kind of things Wachtel's been doing?" Rosalind echoed. "What has he been doing?"

"I didn't tell them to do it," Bernard Quayle muttered. "We needed the neighborhood cleared out, and money wasn't doing it. RenanTech was Belinda's project; I gave her carte blanche to handle it the way she wanted, and she wanted David to do it, to test out that damned drug she bought us into ..." He sounded aggrieved, as if everyone but him had been behaving badly.

"Bernard, are you saying RenanTech was using force to get residents out of the neighborhood?" Rosalind asked dangerously. "Are you saying that the Cutter—"

"I didn't authorize it; it was all Belinda," the old man said querulously. "I told her there would be problems ..."

"*Problems.*" There was a light of fury in Rosalind's eyes. Quayle did not seem to notice. Foggy did.

"Rosalind, the best thing we can do right now is to call the cops and let them handle all this. Where are we?" he asked.

Quayle answered in his normal voice, collected and urbane. "This is Belinda's office. We could get out that way." He pointed toward a door that Foggy presumed led to the hallway.

"No one is going anywhere until that fight is stopped and we get my *other* partner out of there." Rosalind was already heading for the phone on the big desk. She paused long enough to look around her. "Your granddaughter should have stuck to interior decoration. She has a great eye. Yes, 911? I want to report a brawl in progress ..."

Matt did not wait for his hypersenses to tell him the three others were safely out of the room. He headed for the other door at the far end of the room, not even bothering to

pretend to feel his way there. Belinda and Wachtel were too wrapped up in their combat. He had to get out of the room, find a place to change, and come back to stop them.

He went through the door and found himself in another expensively decorated room: more wool carpet, more solid, well-polished wood furniture. It was not Belinda Quayle's office; from the mixture of trace-scents in the room he was pretty sure it was David Wachtel's. A good-sized room; one of the windows was boarded-over, and Matt realized with a shock that this was the room where Louis Bastuto had met with Wachtel. There were golf clubs, a baseball bat, a neat pyramid of soccer and basketballs in the corner; a big glassed-in display case filled with ... well, that cinched it. Pieces of metal, cold, inert and deadly. Knives. Maybe a dozen, most of them big, well honed.

The guy's a knife freak. If any doubt that Wachtel was the Cutter had lingered in his mind, it was gone. *Reminder to self-do not let Wachtel get to the weapons in this room!*

There was another crash next door.

It took less than sixty seconds for Matt Murdock to become Daredevil, donning the costume, slipping on the mask with the tiny horns rising from his forehead. He lashed out with his billy club to break one of the windows—that would explain how Daredevil got in the building—before he swung up to the ceiling, crawled between the drop frame and the upper floor, and moved through to the conference room. The lightweight supports would not hold him for long, but he didn't need a long time. He pushed an acoustic ceiling tile away and, from his vantage point above, surveyed the situation.

Belinda was locked in the Cutter's arms in an embrace so tight it almost looked erotic, but her manicured fingers were around the man's throat and her face was red with the effort she was making to throttle him. She should not have been able to fight with Wachtel at all, but the Bug had

clearly augmented her strength as it had Wachtel's. They were both in a state of nearly transcendent rage.

"You stupid, stupid, stupid—" Belinda was gasping. "You've spoiled everything, everything! It was mine, I could have given you—"

"Nothing," Wachtel twisted his head as if the gesture alone would force her hands away. "You were never going to share any of it with anyone. Just like the old man. You used me and—"

"Moron! Why else did I keep you with me all these years? It's the Bug talking, I told you you took too much. God, you are so stupid—no wonder you couldn't cut it at Wharton, no wonder—"

From the snarl on Belinda Quayle's lips, she was hitting a sore spot, Daredevil thought. If she wanted a reaction, she got one, but it couldn't have been the one she wanted.

Bellowing, Wachtel tightened his arms. Daredevil heard bone crunch, then heard the ply of muscle and bone as Wachtel lifted Belinda like a baby and flung her across the room. Her skull smacked against the wood paneling, and she whimpered and slid into unconsciousness.

Showtime, Daredevil thought.

"That the way you treat all your dates?" he asked, crashing through acoustic tile and support brackets to land, just out of Wachtel's reach, on the part of the conference table that was still standing.

Wachtel's head whipped around, but he was so muscle-bound that he had to turn his whole torso in order to look the other man in the eye. "Daredevil," he spat. "What, you working for Bernard now too?"

"Doesn't anyone get to be an independent contractor in this city?" Daredevil asked. He danced back, just out of Wachtel's range, luring the big man to come to him. He again had the uncanny, eldritch feeling of sparring with himself: Wachtel's heartbeat was echoing his own again,

but there was that murmur to focus on now, and he'd never lose track of the Cutter again.

Wachtel picked up another chair and hurled it at Daredevil. The man in red neatly sidestepped the chair, but it hit the door to Wachtel's office and knocked it down.

"Is it her or Bernard, is it her or Bernard?" Wachtel growled. "One of them, one of them, one of them ..."

Daredevil cast his grappling line over the ceiling support above him, grabbed his billy club in both hands, and used the line and club like a trapeze, swinging forward to slam into Wachtel's chest with both feet. The big man tumbled backward with a huge crash, but was back on his feet immediately; his balance wasn't great, but he was nearly insensible to pain. He plowed forward, swinging at Daredevil, using his meaty arm as a club, but without his Bowie he didn't have the range he was used to, and the Man Without Fear ducked to one side, to the other, out of harm's way.

Wachtel kept swinging. "Which one, which one," he droned. The big man's mind was fraying as they fought, Daredevil thought. Not that that was a help; it didn't make him less dangerous. Maybe more so. It was hard to move in the conference room with the wreckage of the conference table in the middle, and chairs to dodge around. Daredevil let the Cutter make his attacks and concentrated on staying just out of range. Let the big man wear himself down.

In the corner near the hall door, Belinda moaned. Both Daredevil and Wachtel turned at the noise, then Wachtel dodged forward again, off-balance, stumbling over a chair. What he hadn't been able to do with his fists he very nearly did by accident: knock Daredevil down. He slammed forward, trying not to fall, and plowed into Daredevil with one shoulder, forcing him through the open door into Wachtel's office. To keep from taking a pratfall, Daredevil somersaulted backward, coming up on his feet in time to

see Wachtel filling the doorway, holding on to the sill and eyeing the office like an animal within reach of its own lair.

Daredevil could sense the moment when Wachtel's eye lit on his collection of knives, and his adrenaline level soared.

Oh, great. He's found his toys.

Wachtel charged like an elephant, straight for the case. Daredevil sidestepped and pivoted, landing a side kick to his opponent's kidneys that should have dropped him. Wachtel grunted, staggered forward ... and recovered. He lunged for the knife case and plunged his hand through, heedless of flying glass and spattering blood from his own hands, and came up with a short, double-edged blade with a horn handle.

Daredevil scented blood on the handle, just a trace and long dried. *Whose blood?* he wondered.

Wachtel's own blood was running down the sleeves of his torn, disheveled business suit. The man didn't seem to notice.

I'm not going to stop this guy just by hitting him. The Bug is keeping him from feeling the pain. I'm going to have to keep hurting him, damaging him, until he stops, until I've done so much damage he can't go on. Can I fight that way?

Before Daredevil could answer his own question, Wachtel was advancing on him. He swept the knife at Daredevil once, twice, then threw it aside, looking disgusted. He rummaged frantically through the case, did not find what he wanted there, turned to his desk and pulled the bottom drawer open with a jerk so powerful that the drawer flew out of the desk and smashed against the wall behind.

The knife, the big black Bowie with which the Cutter had sliced his victims, lay on the floor. At the scent of the knife, Daredevil's gut tightened with rage; the weapon still

had spatters of Karen's blood on the hilt and in the hairline crevice between blade and tang.

With one breath, both men dived for the knife. Wachtel was closer and got it first. Daredevil, spinning out of reach, recognized the fury in Wachtel's growl, a killing rage that nothing short of unconsciousness was going to stop.

Just keep slamming him and stay away from that knife, he thought. An ugly fight was going to get uglier.

Wachtel swept out with the Bowie in a vicious arc. Daredevil rocked back and aimed a kick at the knife hilt, putting enough force behind it to break bones. The kick missed by centimeters; Daredevil recovered his feet and kicked again, this time at Wachtel's left knee.

He heard a crunch of bone. Wachtel cried out, then bit down on the noise and sliced at Daredevil again and again, making the knife a wall between him and the man in red. Despite the broken knee, he wasn't even limping when he stepped forward again. Wachtel was fighting without words now, just grunts that punctuated each sweep with the knife. On one sweep Daredevil seized the other man's wrist and pulled him hard, to throw him forward into the wall. Instead, Wachtel wrenched his arm back and threw Daredevil onto the desk behind him, so hard he slid off and landed on his back behind it, crunched awkwardly between desk and wall with the wind knocked out of him.

Wachtel turned ponderously, seized the desk, and threw it aside.

"Thanks," Daredevil managed as he rolled to his feet. "Couldn't have done it without you."

The big man roared furiously and charged.

Gotta stop this now, Daredevil thought. *Tired, and I think I broke a rib. Okay, Big Boy. This is for Karen—*He lashed up with the billy club and broke Wachtel's elbow. The knife flew out of the man's grasp, but he swung at Daredevil left-handed. *This is for Siobhan—a kick to* Wachtel's ribs and more bones broken. The big man kept

advancing. *This is for Hassan Denges and the others—* another kick, this time to the left leg, the one with the broken knee. Wachtel teetered, shifted his balance to his right leg and tried another blow at Daredevil with his left hand.

Daredevil stepped away, out of range. “Stop, for God’s sake, stop,” he muttered between clenched teeth. He was exhausted, and sickened by what he was doing to the other man.

Wachtel lowered his head and charged like a bull, wildly unbalanced by the broken knee and tibia, and threw his shoulder into Daredevil’s chest, slamming both of them into the far wall before Daredevil could twist out of the way. Winded, he scrambled to his feet, arms poised to bring down a two-fisted blow on the back of the other man’s head. Adrenaline-laced blood was pounding in his ears; he stopped the last blow just in time. Wachtel’s charge had slammed his own head into the wall. He was unconscious at last.

Daredevil slumped against the wall, gasping for breath.

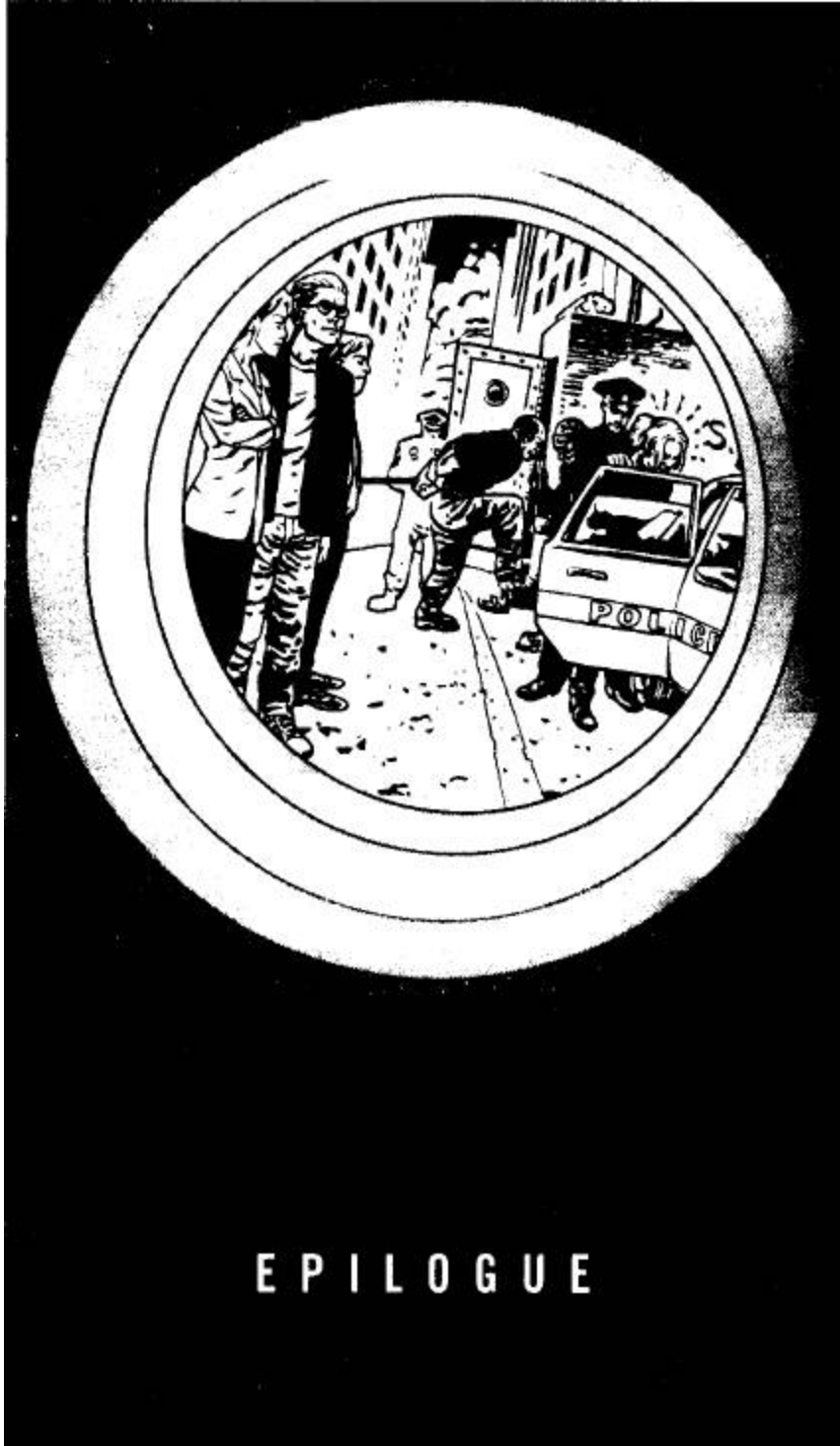
He heard two things: the caterwaul of sirens from arriving police cars, and Rosalind Sharpe’s voice from another room, calling his name.

Great time to show your concern, he thought. *Any old minute now I’ll get out my Matt-suit and change back. Any old minute...*

Wachtel was alive, anyway. And the police would find enough evidence with the knives and the testimony of the Quayles, to lock the Cutter away someplace very secure. Hopefully, somewhere with padded walls.

Rosalind was arguing with Foggy.

Time to stand up.



EPILOGUE

Exhausted, Matt was happy to let events unfold on their own, happy to let Foggy and Rosalind explain matters to the police, to let them explain everything all over again when Detective Sergeant Hawkins and his partner arrived on the scene. The cumulative effects of his fight with Wachtel, nights with not enough sleep, his worry and rage over Karen's kidnapping, had finally hit. All Matt wanted to do was sit with his eyes closed, tuning out as much of the bustle around him as possible.

Now and then someone would ask him a question, just to fill in the blanks. He confirmed that it was Daredevil who'd stopped Wachtel. He confirmed that Bernard Quayle had accused his granddaughter of abusing some sort of muscle-enhancing therapy, and suggested that the police really ought to run some tests on Wachtel to check for the same substance in his blood. He gave them Gregg D'Orazio's name, as the expert on the Bug—D'Orazio would probably know the tests to use. When he winced, he agreed that he'd maybe broken a rib when he was scrambling to get out of the way of the brawl, and he let one of the paramedics tape it for him.

By the time Belinda was taken away under police guard by the paramedics, she had awakened, and was spewing accusations furiously, naming David Wachtel as the Cutter—and her grandfather as an accomplice. She talked a mile a minute, rambling wildly. Aside from the knock on the head, Matt's hypersenses told him that her metabolic rate was still off kilter, as if the huge surges of adrenaline generated during the fight with Wachtel had sped up the work the Bug was doing on her autonomic systems. The weird attraction she'd exerted over him—even that morning—was gone. She smelled *wrong*, repulsive in the truest meaning of the word. Her muscles had massed larger, responding to the needs of the fight, and her clothes strained over her arms, thighs and across her back.

Wachtel, also conscious and in heavy restraints, had been checked out by the paramedics, stabilized, and taken off to the hospital for treatment prior to being booked for assault. The little he said was incoherent; Matt wasn't sure if that was because of the final blow to the head he'd taken, or if the Bug was causing some kind of mental deterioration.

Bernard Quayle sat quietly on one of the few unbroken chairs in the conference room, watching with detached curiosity as Wachtel and his granddaughter were treated and taken into custody. He seemed frail and tired, a blanket draped over his shoulders and his narrow, long-fingered hands clasped in his lap. He had known all along that Wachtel was the Cutter, but Matt didn't have a way to prove it, and now, he thought, Quayle was about to get up and go home, scott free.

"Mr. Quayle?" Detective Drew was leaning over the old man. "I'll need to ask you to come along with us now."

Matt sat up straight. A shock of pain from his broken rib tore through him, but he ignored it, fascinated by the drama being played out on the other side of the room.

"Perhaps one of you gentlemen will give me a lift back to my office?" Bernard said calmly. His voice was cool and unflustered, courteous but just slightly arrogant. The voice of a commander. His erratic heartbeat told another story; he was playing at confidence, bluffing.

And it wasn't working.

"That won't be possible until we've had a talk, Mr. Quayle." Drew's tone was courteous enough, but Matt could tell the detective did not like Quayle particularly, and was not impressed by the old man's forceful assumption of innocence. "Some very serious charges have been made against you—"

"By my granddaughter? Good God, man, look at the situation she's in; she'd say anything to share the blame. I

called my attorneys here today to throw her off the board of my company—”

Drew coughed. “Actually, sir, Ms. Quayle’s accusation was not the only one.”

Quayle’s face reddened. “Rosalind! A moment please!” he barked out.

Rosalind turned, murmured, “Excuse me,” to the detective she was talking to—a short, trim woman named Liverakos—and made her way to Quayle’s side.

“Excuse us,” the old man said to Drew. “I believe I’m entitled to privacy when I talk to counsel?”

Matt felt Rosalind’s face flush. “I’m not your counsel in this matter, Bernard.”

Drew took a step back, looked at them both, shook his head and walked a few paces away. “Sort this out, Ms. Sharpe. I don’t want any legal inconsistencies when we bring this before a judge.”

“There won’t be any, Detective,” Rosalind assured him. She turned back to Bernard; the muscles in her back and neck were so tight Matt heard them squeak with the movement. He did not envy Quayle. The old man was relaxed, now that the detective had stepped away and he was dealing with what he thought was a known quantity. Matt wondered if Quayle had any clue about what was about to hit him.

“Now, Rosie, what’s all this? The police have taken everything Belinda has said as gospel truth, and I’m going to need some help sorting it all out.” His tone was affectionate but mildly scolding, the tone of a teacher whose prize student had gotten out of hand. “Of course, I’ll need to retain your services in this matter. At least, like your mobsters, I can pay.”

She shook her head, and the silver streak that contrasted so startlingly with her black hair fell for a moment over one eye. She pushed the hair away from her face with an impatient gesture. “You *will* need to retain

counsel, and I can recommend a firm if you like. I won't touch this case."

Quayle's smile hardened in place. His voice lost its gentle amusement and became cold and commanding. "Are you telling me that my case is worse than that of a drug dealer? A murderer? Some maniac like Mr. Hyde, or the Gladiator? Aren't you throwing stones a little too hard at the glass house you live in, Rosie?"

Rosalind faced down her old mentor and lover with a smile like death. "Everyone is entitled to a defense, Bernie. But they're not entitled to *my* defense. You as much as confessed your complicity in a plot to kill people in this neighborhood in order to scare the rest of the residents away. Even if you didn't give the orders yourself, you knew David Wachtel was the Cutter, and you let him kill people, let him hurt a friend of mine—"

"That was a mistake!" Quayle broke in. "Neither Belinda nor I intended that!"

Rosalind looked at him, brows wrinkled as if she could not make sense of what she was seeing. "Bernard, calling any of it a *mistake* is such a grotesque understatement I can't believe I'm hearing it. You're guilty at least as accessory before and after the fact in two murders, maybe three, and it doesn't seem to bother you particularly. I always admired your ability to manipulate markets and people, but what you've done here is sick—"

"*I* didn't do anything! It was Belinda's plan!" he protested.

"You did not do anything to stop it. And at whose knee did she learn her techniques? I learned some of them myself, and maybe that blinded me to the fact that the only sin in your book is getting caught. I will not defend you."

Quayle regarded her thoughtfully. "All right, you need not. But you can't accuse me, either. I *did* call you here as counsel, and even if you refuse to represent me now,

anything I said to you is surely covered by attorney/client privilege."

Foggy had come up behind his mother a moment before. Now he stepped in next to her and put his arm around Rosalind's shoulders.

"Matt Murdock and I, however, represent Louis Bastuto." Foggy gestured across the room to where his partner sat. "If you think back, you'll remember that we informed you first thing at the meeting that he and I were only there to protect Mr. Bastuto's interests. I've had a long chat with Detective Hawkins, and I think you're going to have a longer one."

Detective Drew stepped back in to the conversation. "If you don't have an attorney and can't afford one, one will be appointed by the court," he said helpfully.

Quayle frowned up at the man. "Your irony is not appreciated, Detective. This is all a mess, and will obviously take some effort to untangle. Well," he stood up, shrugged the blanket off his shoulders, and shot his cuffs impatiently, "we might as well get on with this so that I can get back to work. Do you need to handcuff me?" he asked Drew sarcastically.

Drew smiled. "As a matter of fact, I do," he said. "Thanks for being so understanding." Ignoring Quayle's look of outrage, Drew blandly took a pair of cuffs from his pocket.

Rosalind shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. "That's enough hugging, Franklin; we're not at a twelve-step meeting." Foggy took his arm away as if scorched. "Matthew, if they're done coddling you, let's get back to the office. I cannot believe the number of hours we've wasted this morning—and now that we've cut Bernard loose as a client, we can't even bill for them!"

After his second visit to Ryker's Island to examine Wachtel and Belinda, D'Orazio accepted Matt's invitation to lunch. They met at Golden's Deli again, Matt, Gregg, and

Ben Urich, whose exclusive background stories on the Cutter had headlined the *Bugle* for almost a week.

"For one thing, I can't believe anyone who got through Harvard could have been that stupid, not even if the only science course she ever took was Sci 114."

"Come again?" Urich growled.

"Science for Poets. Look, would *you* try a drug you knew had major side effects?" D'Orazio asked, talking around his sandwich again. "Who did they think they were, Dr. Jekyll or something? Cripes. Anyone on the research floors would have told them that the nanotech is a progressive, not a cumulative, therapy—"

"In layman's terms?" Matt prodded.

D'Orazio grinned. "Sorry. You only need one dose of the Bug. Once it's in your system, it's designed to create an optimum colonization in the blood—unless you take more than one dose. Near as I've been able to tell, Wachtel took five or six doses, and Belinda Quayle took, I dunno, three or four. The side effects are accelerating in Wachtel, too—have you seen him? I mean ..."

D'Orazio broke off in confusion, eyeing the blind lawyer uneasily. "The muscle mass he'd put on is turning tumorous, his muscle tissue is in a state of random uncontrolled growth. In layman's terms: he's *really* gross. And his mind's deteriorating at the same rate. I haven't seen a CAT scan, but I wouldn't bet that there aren't lesions in the brain by this time."

"So what exactly were the side effects?" Matt asked. He wanted confirmation that the things he'd sensed—the anomalies in Wachtel's heartbeat, and Belinda's pheromone surges—really were products of the Bug.

D'Orazio grinned. Matt could tell he was still in love with his nanotech work; he talked about the Bug with affection.

"You choose," he said now. "I told you a couple weeks ago: the Bug's side effect—much more so in a healthy

subject—was to randomly hype up autonomic function.” He popped an out-sized potato chip into his mouth and crunched for a moment before he went on. “All sound is vibration, right? And vibrations can become attuned to each other? Somehow, Wachtel’s hypothalamus—that’s the organ that regulates autonomic function—became acutely attuned to the sound, the vibration, of the heartbeats of people around him. And that caused a sympathetic mimicry.”

“Cosmic irony: man with no sympathy has heart that beats sympathetically.” Ben Urich’s tone was as dry as if he was reading a *Bugle* headline. “But if his heartbeat was attuned to vibrations, why didn’t it pick up the beat of every hip-hop song he heard blasting from a boom box?”

“We don’t know for sure that it didn’t,” D’Orazio admitted. “I think pheromones may have played a part in what vibrations Wachtel’s hypothalamus did and didn’t react to. The problem we’re having now is that the Bug is still at work, and his system isn’t static.”

“It’s still mutating?” Matt asked.

“*Mutate* is a word I use very carefully these days,” D’Orazio said soberly. “But essentially, yeah. The other complication is the strain it put on his heart, the rhythms shifting that way. Wachtel developed a heart murmur, and that may not be all. He’s not going to live to an honorable old age, that guy.”

“And the side effects in Belinda Quayle were similar?” Ben Urich asked. He was scribbling notes furiously on his lined pad; in between he worked on his own sandwich.

D’Orazio shook his head. Hormone shifts, paranoia—those were the only things aside from the abnormal muscle development that he was sure of at this point. He had focused his clinical attention on Wachtel as the more “useful” of his two subjects—or at least the more overtly bizarre. Belinda was still experiencing hypertrophic muscle growth, and there were adrenaline surges.

“Pheromone shifts?” Matt asked. He stepped around the subject carefully—the last thing he needed was to tip his own hand as Daredevil by suggesting something that Matt Murdock could never have known. He contented himself with asking if there was any help possible for Wachtel or Belinda.

“Belinda, maaay-be.” D’Orazio drew the word out to emphasize its unlikelihood. “Not Wachtel. He’s too far gone; we projected two to three years to fix the problems with the Bug before. *Now* someone’d have to find a way to undo what the Bug’s done. I don’t know anyone who wants to pay for that research.”

“I guess Bernard Quayle doesn’t?” Matt asked blandly.

It was Urich who answered. “Not likely. Quayle is out on bail, and he’s hired a couple of legal hot shots from Hansen, Eden and Cumberbatch. He’s got them working overtime to disassociate himself from Belinda. She, however, appears to have kept copies of every e-mail he ever sent, and recorded every phone call they had. With the DA doing backflips to get that stuff ruled admissible, some of it *will* show up in court. Considering Nelson’s testimony, and Belinda’s, Bernard is pretty likely to spend his declining years in Camp Lockup.”

D’Orazio smiled bitterly. “Only happened a couple years too late for Carl.”

“Your partner?” Urich prompted. “Did they—”

“Omar Glass regained consciousness two days ago. Named Wachtel as his attacker, which was icing on the cake. And he confessed to cutting Carl Hauser’s brakes, under direct orders from Wachtel. This was before he got into doing his nasty bits of dirty work all himself.” Matt fished out his wallet, pulled out a twenty, put it on the table to cover the bill.

“And those S.O.B.s wound up owning the Bug.” D’Orazio pushed his plate away as if his appetite had finally deserted

him. "We could have done some real good with it. Would have taken a while, but we had years."

Urich stood up from the table and offered Matt his arm. Matt stood also, thinking for a moment. "You know, ownership of RenanTech springs from an illegal action—the death of Carl Hauser. Someone could make a case for returning the intellectual property developed by RenanTech to its original authors."

"*Someone?*" The warmth from the rush of blood to the scientist's face was so sudden, Matt felt like he'd turned to face the sun. He smiled.

"SNM doesn't do intellectual property law, but I could send you to someone. Hey ..." he added, as D'Orazio fumbled for his hand, trying to shake it as the three men headed through the crowded deli toward the street, "... I'm one of the good guys, right?"

"You're the best," D'Orazio crowed. "Are you sure you're a lawyer?"

Some meetings weren't that pleasant. On Wednesday, Matt was driven out to Ryker's by Steve Zdinak again; went through the ID checks and suffered the short ride on the airless, overly warm DOC bus which took him to the Women's Detention building.

When Belinda was brought in to the interview room he barely recognized her. Her heartbeat was erratic, but discernibly hers. Her smell was wrong. There was about her a subtle smell of corruption and decay, as if she were rotting from the inside out. He felt the faint warmth from the flush in her cheeks, a false healthiness. And he could sense how her body had changed: the muscles in her neck were corded and bulky; her arms and thighs thick and defined beneath the prison coverall. The bruises from her fight with Wachtel were fading, and the slight smell of antiseptic and antibiotic ointments was several days old.

The effects of the fight were fading, as the effects of the Bug increased.

She still moved sinuously, and spoke like a woman who believed herself irresistible. "So you came." She made it sound as if it were a foregone conclusion, but her voice was low, seductive. She slid into the chair opposite his at the table.

"You asked me to," Matt said noncommittally. "What is it you want?"

Belinda tossed her hair back and leaned forward in a parody of seduction. It made Matt glad he could pretend not to see what she was doing.

"I want you to defend me."

He shook his head. "I've already explained to you on the phone: I can't. I'm opposing counsel in Louis Bastuto's case. And I'm a witness for the prosecution in your own case. Conflict of interest."

She frowned, leaned further forward. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his face. "You could if you wanted to," she purred. "You could find a way."

"I couldn't, even if I wanted to," he assured her coldly. "And frankly, I don't. I don't like the way you did business; I certainly wouldn't want to represent you."

She took that in and sat back, glaring. "Things didn't work out the way I wanted." She sounded resentful, as if it were somehow his fault. "Look at me." She stood up so suddenly that Matt felt the guard behind him tense with readiness. "I look like ... like the Hulk's baby sister. And it's going to get worse."

"Sit down," the guard barked. "Or the interview's over."

Belinda sat down. "It's going to get worse," she repeated.

"I don't know ..." Matt began. He wasn't sure whether to say something reassuring or go for the bitter truth. She beat him to it.

"I know what's going to happen to me, Mr. Murdock—I saw David at the arraignment. It was ..." She swallowed. "It was grotesque. He looks like a monster. He used to be so *beautiful*. When we were in college, God, he was gorgeous. He used to say if the body was a temple, his was the Sistine Chapel. And now ..."

Her mouth twisted with revulsion. "His mind is shot. Gone. My lawyer says he'll never go to trial, just into a nice padded cell somewhere where he can scream and drool to his heart's content." She smiled bitterly. "They're probably saving the cell next door for me. So there's one thing you can do for me."

"I can't represent you," Matt said again.

Her body was rigid; he could hear the slip of muscle in her face as she smiled, and he suspected that the smile was not a pretty one. "You made your point. But there's something else. *I want you to make sure that my grandfather dies in prison.*"

The venom in her voice was almost palpable. It was as if saying those words had transformed her, brought out the most violent, paranoid part of her unstable personality.

"I want you to make sure that the old man doesn't shave a minute off his time," Belinda continued. "I want to make sure that when I'm rotting inside my body, he's rotting, too, somewhere where no one has ever heard of Quayle-Partido." Her voice rose higher, she spoke faster as she warmed to the subject. "It's all his fault, he abandoned me, kept his hands clean. He wants me to take the fall for him, but to hell with that—I can bring him down! You just have to help me. You *have* to."

"I'm sure the District Attorney—"

"No!" It was close to a howl. "He can *buy* the District Attorney! He can buy anyone! Don't you see that? I want you to make sure the District Attorney doesn't get a chance to screw this up! I want ... I want ..."

She slumped back in the chair, as if the balloon had burst. When she spoke again, it was with the resentful sullenness she'd shown earlier.

"I'm not stupid, Mr. Murdock. I played a risky game and I lost it. I lost it very big, and I'm going to wind up a monster like David. The only thing that comforts me is that my grandfather, who twisted my life around his fingers to make me what I am, isn't going to be able to twist his way out of this. Make sure he doesn't, Mr. Murdock. Just make sure of it."

She stood up, called out to the guard that she was done, and turned her back on Matt with her accustomed arrogance, raising a hand to straighten the collar of her coverall. Matt noted without turning his head that she was becoming muscle-bound; she had to strain to get her hand close enough to make the adjustment.

She didn't stop at the door. Just gave herself into the custody of the guard and was gone.

It was a perfect June evening. The air slid soft as silk over the skin, and the light breeze that swept over the rooftop made the dying heat of the day bearable. The sky was a clear turquoise, and the lights of the city were flickering on, one by one, building by building across the cityscape. A slice of new moon grinned down at the city below.

"Pretty night," Karen said. She and Matt were leaning against the east-facing wall of the roof, looking out over the city.

"Tell me about the colors," Matt said quietly.

She did, making her voice gentle and singsong as she described the neon signs, the traffic lights burning hot and cold on the street below; the cars and trucks, the kids in baggy jeans and tank tops; the crude wooden flower boxes overflowing with sloppy, cheerful geraniums and pansies;

the lights strung across the rooftop and the big, hand-lettered sign that said WELCOME HOME.

"Tell me what you hear," she said at last. Tit for tat was only fair.

"Cars, buses, the subway rattling along. Kids playing. Cops on the beat. Women in high-heeled shoes, joggers thudding around the Reservoir. Leaves shaking in the breeze. Stuff."

"Stuff?" Karen elbowed him. "*Stuff?*"

Ten feet behind them, Matt sensed his partner coming. "Matthew, are you sure Karen should be on her feet?" Rosalind scolded.

Karen turned easily. "Why don't you ask me, Rosalind? Matt's not my keeper."

"As to which of you needs a keeper more ..." Rosalind paused. "I won't even go there. Oh, marvelous, Louis Bastuto is going to make a *speech*." She wrinkled her nose; Rosalind was not partial to speeches unless she was the one making them. "I think they want us front and center to be thanked."

Matt turned back toward the party, locating Foggy in the throng, talking about law school with a skinny kid in hip-hop clothes. Siobhan Sealy was standing to one side, talking animatedly to a crowd of women, gesturing broadly with one hand; her other arm was still in a sling. She was smiling, laughing, apparently unselfconscious about the line of stitches that crisscrossed her cheek and forehead. And beyond Siobhan, standing under the welcome home sign, trying without much success to gather everyone's attention, was Louis Bastuto. One of his daughters, the oldest one, was leaning into his side, arm around her daddy's waist; it occurred to Matt that since they'd arrived at the party he hadn't seen Bastuto without one or more of his kids in his arms or at his side. Right now Amy, his pretty, shy wife, sat in the background with the toddler on her lap, watching the party going on around her.

"Hey! Everyone! Just a second, okay?" Bastuto shouted. Karen urged Matt forward, hand under his elbow.

"Hey!" Bastuto tried again. "I mean really just a second, okay?"

There were chuckles and groans from his neighbors. "You gotta make a speech, Louis?" someone yelled.

He was unfazed. "Yeah, I gotta make a speech. I'm entitled to make a speech, and I'm gonna. So the quicker you shut up, Gary, the faster you can get back to your date."

More chuckles, but the noise on the roof was dying down.

Matt stood with his arm around Karen, savoring the *wholeness* of her. Safe, alive, well. *His*.

Louis Bastuto cleared his throat. "Here it comes," Rosalind muttered. Karen elbowed *her*.

"Anyone here ever ask you what the most beautiful word in the English language is, you can tell 'em: home. And I'm really glad to be back in mine. I have a lot of people to thank for that: Amy—" Matt felt Amy Bastuto's blush from fifteen feet away as she hid her face in her toddler's hair. "All the people here on the co-op board. My lawyer, Mr. Murdock—"

"I told you, it's Matt," Matt called out easily.

"Yeah, right. Well, Matt and his partners, who took good care of me even though I'm not rich or powerful. And Siobhan, here, who kept it all together and got herself in a world of trouble for it. And Ms. Page—"

"Karen!" Karen corrected.

"Karen. Who almost got herself killed because she believed in the co-op, and Siobhan, and me. I just have to say thank you to all those people. And welcome home to Siobhan, and to Karen Page, too." He took a step back, signaling that his speech was over.

"Well, at least it was short," Rosalind said. "Your Mr. Bastuto has no future in public speaking, Matthew."

"Rosalind, you're ..." Karen shook her head, as if words failed her.

The older woman linked her arm through Karen's. "All that and more. Introduce me to Siobhan Sealy, would you? She should have been making that speech, of course." Matt released Karen and stood, following her slow progress across the roof until she and Rosalind had reached the crowd around Siobhan.

Matt and Karen did not stay much longer at the party. Karen pled fatigue, but really, they just wanted some time alone together. They walked up 10th Avenue arm in arm, companionably silent. For a few minutes, Matt was lost in his own thoughts, thinking about the Cutter, about what his old neighborhood had won, and lost.

That's a couple of bad guys down, he thought.

The breeze ruffled his red hair and bits of paper skirled around his feet with faint, crinkling noises. One more threat to his city, to his neighborhood, brought down. There would be more. He sighed. There were always more. But maybe not tonight. He had done what he swore to do a decade before when he put on the homed mask and stepped out into the night as Daredevil.

"Hey, you," Karen, at his side, pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "Having a good time?"

He slid his arm around her shoulders, reveling in the sound of her heart, the scent of her skin, her warmth, which penetrated his jacket and shirt and burned itself into his skin. "With you?" he asked. "Always."

She nuzzled his shoulder. "So what do you want to do?"

"I have some ideas. How about you?"

"We could rent a movie, then curl up on the couch together and ignore it."

Matt laughed. "That sounds good. We could even forget the movie."

"Even better," Karen agreed. "I love you a lot."

He tugged her gently into his arms and kissed her.
“That,” he said lightly, “is what keeps me going.”

Madeleine E. Robins is a writer and editor born, raised, and living in New York City (which, if it isn't a requirement to write a Daredevil novel, really ought to be). Most recently an editor at Acclaim Comics, she has also done freelance copy writing and design, ghostwritten child-psychology texts, and taught writing and software. She has been a swordfighter (SAFD-certified actor-combatant), a nanny, hurt book repairer, and has run residential summer programs at Harvard University—a task roughly equivalent to stuffing camels through the eyes of needles on a daily basis. She worked in an investment bank for two years, but never met anyone remotely like Bernard or Belinda Quayle. Honest.' She holds a B.A. from Connecticut College, attended the Clarion Writers Workshop in 1981, and, in addition to *Daredevil: The Cutting Edge*, is the author of six books, including *The Stone War*. She lives on the Upper West Side with her husband and two daughters, and devotes her time to writing and child-rearing, in about equal measure.

Max Douglas, from 1990 to 1993, did some work for Marvel Comics, but he's feeling much better now, thanks. These days, he spends most of his time working on some of his own stories, but you can find his work in the novel *X-Men: Law of the Jungle*, *The Essential Phantom of the Opera*, and the anthologies *The Ultimate Super-Villains* and *Blood Thirst: 100 Years of Vampire Fiction*. Max has also been a contributor to *The Big Book of the Weird*, *Wild West*, *The Big Book of Vice*, the *Montreal Mirror*, and the magazines *Exclaim!* and *Vice*. Max often lives in Canada, where, in his spare time, you'll find him hunting for cool, old records in the Plateau district of Montreal.

CHRONOLOGY TO THE MARVEL NOVELS AND ANTHOLOGIES

What follows is a guide to the order in which the Marvel novels and short stories published by Byron Preiss Multimedia Company and Berkley Boulevard Books take place in relation to each other. Please note that this is not a hard and fast chronology, but a guideline that is subject to change at authorial or editorial whim. This list covers all the novels and anthologies published from October 1994-September 1999.

The short stories are each given an abbreviation to indicate which anthology the story appeared in. *USM*=*The Ultimate Spider-Man*, *USS*=*The Ultimate Silver Surfer*, *USV*=*The Ultimate Super-Villains*, *UXM*=*The Ultimate X-Men*, *UTS*=*Untold Tales of Spider-Man*, and *UH*=*The Ultimate Hulk*.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this chronology, please write us.

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X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 1: The Past
[portions]

by Tom DeFalco & Jason Henderson

Parts of this novel take place in prehistoric times, the sixth century, 1867, and 1944.

"The Silver Surfer" [flashback]

by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]

The Silver Surfer's origin. The early parts of this flashback start several decades, possibly several centuries, ago, and continue to a point just prior to "To See Heaven in a Wild Flower."

"In the Line of Banner"

by Danny Fingeroth [UH]

This takes place nine months before the birth of Robert Bruce Banner.

X-Men: Codename Wolverine ["then" portions]

by Christopher Golden

The “then” portions of this novel take place while Team X was still in operation, while the Black Widow was still a Soviet spy, and while Banshee was still with Interpol.

“Spider-Man”

by Stan Lee & Peter David [USM] *A retelling of Spider-Man’s origin.*

“Transformations”

by Will Murray [UH]

“Side by Side with the Astonishing Ant-Man!”

by Will Murray [UTS]

“Assault on Avengers Mansion”

by Richard C. White & Steven A. Roman [UH]

“Suits”

by Tom De Haven & Dean Wesley Smith [USM]

“After the First Death ...” by Tom DeFalco [UTS]

“Celebrity”

by Christopher Golden & Jose” R. Nieto [UTS]

“Pitfall”

by Pierce Askegren [UH]

“Better Looting Through Modern Chemistry”

by John Garcia & Pierce Askegren [UTS]

These stories take place very early in the careers of Spider-Man and the Hulk.

“To the Victor”

by Richard Lee Byers [USV]

Most of this story takes place in an alternate timeline, but the jumping-off point is here.

“To See Heaven in a Wild Flower”

by Ann Tonsor Zeddies [USS] “Point of View”

by Len Wein [USS]

These stories take place shortly after the end of the flashback portion of "The Silver Surfer."

"Identity Crisis"

by Michael Jan Friedman [UTS]

"The Liar"

by Ann Nocenti [UTS]

"The Doctor's Dilemma"

by Danny Fingeroth [UTS]

"Moving Day"

by John S. Drew [UTS]

"Out of the Darkness"

by Glenn Greenberg [UH]

"Deadly Force"

by Richard Lee Byers [UTS]

"Truck Stop"

by Jo Duffy [UH]

"Hiding"

by Nancy Holder & Christopher Golden [UH]

"Improper Procedure"

by Keith R.A. DeCandido [USS]

"Poison in the Soul"

by Glenn Greenberg [UTS]

"Here There Be Dragons"

by Sholly Fisch [UH]

"The Ballad of Fancy Dan"

by Ken Grobe & Steven A. Roman [UTS]

"Do You Dream in Silver?"

by James Dawson [USS]

"A Quiet, Normal Life"

by Thomas Deja [UH]

"Livewires"

by Steve Lyons [UTS]

"Arms and the Man"

by Keith R.A. DeCandido [UTS]

"Incident on a Skyscraper"

by Dave Smeds [USS]

"A Green Snake in Paradise"

by Steve Lyons [UH]

These all take place at various and sundry points in the careers of Spider-Man, the Silver Surfer, and the Hulk: after their origins, but before Spider-Man got married, the Silver Surfer ended his exile on Earth, and the reemergence of the gray Hulk.

"Cool"

by Lawrence Watt-Evans [USM]

"Blindspot"

by Ann Nocenti [USM]

"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Courier"

by Robert L. Washington III [USM]

"Thunder on the Mountain"

by Richard Lee Byers [USM]

"The Stalking of John Doe"

by Adam-Troy Castro [UTS]

"On the Beach"

by John J. Ordover [USS]

These all take place just prior to Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane Watson and the Silver Surfer's release from imprisonment on Earth.

Daredevil: Predator's Smile

by Christopher Golden

“Disturb Not Her Dream”

by Steve Rasnic Tern [USS]

“My Enemy, My Savior”

by Eric Fein [UTS]

“Kraven the Hunter Is Dead, Alas”

by Craig Shaw Gardner [USM]

“The Broken Land”

by Pierce Askegren [USS]

“Radically Both”

by Christopher Golden [USM]

“Godhood’s End”

by Sharman DiVono [USS]

“Scoop!”

by David Michelinie [USM]

“The Beast with Nine Bands”

by James A. Wolf [UH]

“Sambatyon”

by David M. Honigsberg [USS]

“Cold Blood”

by Greg Cox [USM]

“The Tarnished Soul”

by Katherine Lawrence [USS]

“Leveling Las Vegas”

by Stan Timmons [UH]

“If Wishes Were Horses”

by Tony Isabella & Bob Ingersoll [USV]

“The Silver Surfer” [framing sequence]

by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]

“The Samson Journals”

by Ken Grobe [UH]

These all take place after Peter Parker’s marriage to Mary Jane Watson, after the Silver Surfer attained freedom from imprisonment on Earth, and before the Hulk’s personalities were merged.

“The Deviant Ones”

by Glenn Greenberg [USV]

“An Evening in the Bronx with Venom”

by John Gregory Betancourt & Keith R.A. DeCandido
[USM] *These two stories take place one after the other, and
a few months prior to The Venom Factor.*

The Incredible Hulk: What Savage Beast

by Peter David

This novel takes place over a one-year period, starting here and ending just prior to Rampage.

“On the Air”

by Glenn Hauman [UXM]

“Connect the Dots”

by Adam-Troy Castro [USV]

“Summer Breeze”

by Jenn Saint-John & Tammy Lynne Dunn [UXM]

“Out of Place”

by Dave Smeds [UXM]

These stories all take place prior to the Mutant Empire trilogy-

X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 1: Siege

by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 2: Sanctuary

by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 3: Salvation

by Christopher Golden

These three novels take place within a three-day period.

Fantastic Four: To Free Atlantis

by Nancy A. Collins

"The Love of Death or the Death of Love"

by Craig Shaw Gardner [USS]

"Firetrap"

by Michael Jan Friedman [USV]

"What's Yer Poison?"

by Christopher Golden & Jos6 R. Nieto [USS]

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"Sins of the Flesh"

by Steve Lyons [USV]

"Doom²"

by Joey Cavalieri [USV]

"Child's Play"

by Robert L. Washington III [USV]

"A Game of the Apocalypse"

by Dan Persons [USS]

"All Creatures Great and Skrull"

by Greg Cox [USV]

"Ripples"

by Jos6 R. Nieto [USV]

"Who Do You Want Me to Be?"

by Ann Nocenti [USV]

"One for the Road"

by James Dawson [USV]

These are more or less simultaneous, with "Doom²" taking place after To Free Atlantis, "Child's Play" taking place shortly after "What's Yer Poison?" and "A Game of the Apocalypse" taking place shortly after "The Love of Death or the Death of Love."

"Five Minutes"

by Peter David [USM]

This takes place on Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson-Parker's first anniversary.

Spider-Man: The Venom Factor

by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Lizard Sanction

by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Octopus Agenda

by Diane Duane

These three novels take place within a six-week period.

“The Night I Almost Saved Silver Sable”

by Tom DeFalco [USV]

“Traps”

by Ken Grobe [USV]

These stories take place one right after the other.

Iron Man: The Armor Trap

by Greg Cox

Iron Man: Operation A.I.M.

by Greg Cox "Private Exhibition"

by Pierce Askegren [USV]

Fantastic Four: Redemption of the Silver Surfer

by Michael Jan Friedman

Spider-Man & The Incredible Hulk: Rampage (Doom's Day Book 1)

by Danny Fingeroth & Eric Fein

Spider-Man & Iron Man: Sabotage (Doom's Day Book 2)

by Pierce Askegren & Danny Fingeroth

Spider-Man & Fantastic Four: Wreckage (Doom's Day Book 3)

by Eric Fein & Pierce Askegren

Operation A.I.M. takes place about two weeks after The Armor Trap. The Doom's Day trilogy takes place within a three-month period. The events of Operation A.I.M., "Private Exhibition," Redemption of the Silver Surfer, and Rampage happen more or less simultaneously. Wreckage is only a few months after The Octopus Agenda.

"It's a Wonderful Life"

by eluki bes shahar [UXM]

"Gift of the Silver Fox"

by Ashley McConnell [UXM]

"Stillborn in the Mist"

by Dean Wesley Smith [UXM]

"Order from Chaos"

by Evan Skolnick [UXM]

These stories take place simultaneously.

"X-Presso"

by Ken Grobe [UXM]

"Life Is But a Dream"

by Stan Timmons [UXM]

"Four Angry Mutants"

by Andy Lane & Rebecca Levene [UXM]

"Hostages"

by J. Steven York [UXM]

These stories take place one right after the other.

Spider-Man: Carnage in New York
by David Michelinie & Dean Wesley Smith
Spider-Man: Goblin's Revenge

by Dean Wesley Smith

These novels take place one right after the other.

X-Men: Smoke and Mirrors

by eluki bes shahar

This novel takes place three-and-a-half months after "It's a Wonderful Life."

Generation X
by Scott Lobdell & Elliot S! Maggin
X-Men: The Jewels of Cyttorak

by Dean Wesley Smith
X-Men: Empire's End

by Diane Duane
X-Men: Law of the Jungle

by Dave Smeds
X-Men: Prisoner X

by Ann Nocenti

These novels take place one right after the other.

The Incredible Hulk: Abominations

by Jason Henderson
Fantastic Four: Countdown to Chaos

by Pierce Askegren

“Playing It SAFE”

by Keith R.A. DeCandido [UH]

These take place one right after the other, with Abominations taking place a couple of weeks after Wreckage.

“Mayhem Party”

by Robert Sheckley [USV]

This story takes place after Goblin’s Revenge.

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time’s Arrow Book 1: The Past

by Tom DeFalco & Jason Henderson

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time’s Arrow Book 2: The Present

by Tom DeFalco & Adam-Troy Castro

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time’s Arrow Book 3: The Future

by Tom DeFalco & eluki bes shahar

These novels take place within a twenty-four-hour period in the present, though it also involves travelling to four points in the past, to an alternate present, and to five different alternate futures.

X-Men: Soul Killer

by Richard Lee Byers
Spider-Man: Valley of the Lizard

by John Vornholt

Spider-Man: Venom's Wrath

by Keith R.A. DeCandido & Jose R. Nieto

Captain America: Liberty's Torch

by Tony Isabella & Bob Ingersoll

Daredevil: The Cutting Edge

by Madeleine E. Robins

Spider-Man: Wanted Dead or Alive

by Craig Shaw Gardner
"Sidekick"

by Dennis Brabham [UH]

These take place one after the other, with Soul Killer taking place right after the Time's Arrow trilogy.

Spider-Man: The Gathering of the Sinister Six

by Adam-Troy Castro Generation X: Crossroads

by J. Steven York

X-Men: Codename Wolverine ["now" portions]

by Christopher Golden

These novels take place one right after the other, with the “now ” portions of Codename Wolverine taking place less than a week after Crossroads.

The Avengers & the Thunderbolts

by Pierce Askegren

Spider-Man: Goblin Moon

by Kurt Busiek & Nathan Archer

*These novels take place at approximately the same time
and several months after "Playing it SAFE."*

X-Men & the Avengers: Gamma Quest Book 1

by Greg Cox

X-Men & the Avengers: Gamma Quest Book 2

by Greg Cox

X-Men & the Avengers: Gamma Quest Book 3

by Greg Cox

This trilogy takes place over a three-day period and takes place a couple of months after The Avengers & the Thunderbolts and the “now” portions of Codename Wolverine.

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time’s Arrow Book 3: The Future
[portions]

by Tom DeFalco & eluki bes shahar

Parts of this novel take place in five different alternate futures in 2020, 2035, 2099, 3000, and the fortieth century.

“The Last Titan”

by Peter David [UH]

This takes place in a possible future.

MARVEL

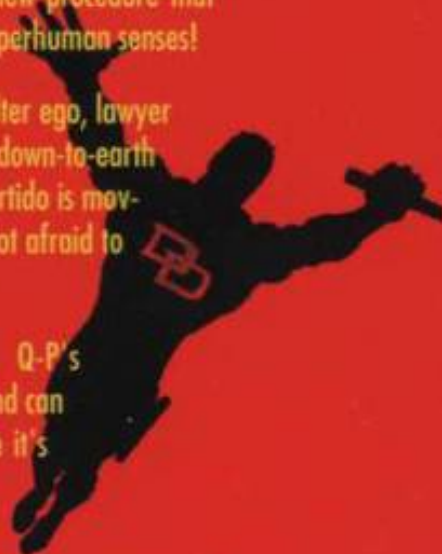
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someone else can make the chronology part look better.